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Actors as Engineers

The Reconstruction of Antifascism in DEFA Films,
1949 - 1961



By Jonathan Herr

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of Arts in History

Department of History, School of Arts and Sciences

**State University of New York
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Actors as Engineers: The Reconstruction of Antifascism in DEFA Films, 1949 - 1961

It is a cool evening in East Berlin, late May 1950.¹ A young, anonymous man walks through the streets with a few *Deutsche Marks* in his overcoat pocket with the intent of spending the evening at the local *Kino*, or cinema. As he approaches the entrance to the historic cinema turned DEFA (*Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft* [literally “German Film Company”]) vehicle, *Babylon Kino*, he stops to admire the glowing lights on the recently renovated façade.² Satisfied, he moves under the overhang to consider the posters for current and upcoming releases hanging on the exterior wall. His eyes are drawn immediately to the poster for tonight’s feature: *Der Rat der Götter* (*Council of the Gods*).

The title of the film is glowing a sickly yellow, centered in a spider’s web that stretches across the dark teal background. In the background are various scenes from the film in a broken mishmash. Images of destruction and fire, fearful faces, even a woman dancing in a gloriously foreign outfit with maracas in hand draw his interest and curiosity.³ He briefly recalls the newspaper reviews he saw about the film in *Neue Zeit* and *Berliner Zeitung* after the film’s premiere earlier that month. “Their (DEFA’s) film *Council of the Gods* is undoubtedly a milestone on the path of world-renown!” one article lauded. Still another praised the film from another angle, comparing it to a “cleansing storm” that opened the public’s eyes to the reality of World War II and the role of industry in it.⁴ With such praise, how could he *not* see this film?!

Satisfied with his choice of film, he purchases a ticket and (for an additional 30 *Pfennigs*) a program. He steps into the theater to find a seat. As he waits for the picture to start, he takes

¹ Author’s Note: The following vignette is a fictionalized account and does not follow a true story, though its construction is based around actual film dates and theaters in East Berlin.

² Michael Hanisch, “Das Babylon – Geschichten um ein Berliner Kino mit Abschweifungen,” History of Babylon Kino, Das Babylon, accessed April 10, 2020. <https://babylonberlin.eu/geschichte-des-babylon>.

³ Detlef Helmbold, *Mehr Kunst als Werbung: Das DDR-Filmplakat, 1945-1990* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2018), 44.

⁴ “‘Der Rat der Götter’ — ein Film für den Frieden,” *Neue Zeit*, May 13, 1950.

And: “Der Rat der Götter: Uraufführung des neuen DEFA-Films im Babylon und in der Kastanienallee,” *Berliner Zeitung*, May 14, 1950.

a minute to review the booklet and its fantastical cover. The title is plastered at the top, but below he sees a cleverly made image superimposing two distinctly different scenes from the film. The dancing woman from the poster is in the foreground, a salsa band behind her – smiling. There is, however, no audience or backdrop to the performance – instead they perform surrounded by large cannisters of Tabun (a lethal nerve gas) adorned with smiling skulls-and-crossbones.⁵ The juxtaposition of these images is powerful in its own right and only serves to add to his anticipation.

He idly thumbs through the program and sees articles discussing the parallels of the film to the infamous IG Farben trial at which numerous officials of the chemical company were acquitted or served light sentences despite evidence tying the company to the Nazi Party, rearmament post WWI, and crimes against humanity. Among these articles and critical discussions on the film are stills from the movie alongside photos from the events dramatized in the film. Amongst the pictures is printed film dialogue that relates to the antifascist themes of the film.

Before he has a chance to truly dwell upon the images and his own feelings, the lights in the theater dim – signaling the start of the film. The young man folds his program and slips it into his overcoat pocket to be perused afterwards. As the opening score swells and the title appears on the screen, he cannot help but feel anxious at the real-life connections. He is excited to see the film and be entertained – but he is perhaps more interested in seeing the truth the program and reviews claim the film shows. He is interested in seeing the role his nation, the German Democratic Republic, played in the fight against capitalism and fascism at large.

⁵ *Der Rat der Götter* (Berlin: Deutschcer Filmverlag GMBH, 1950), 1. Box 1, Hans Joachim Ring Collection (MS 566). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

In films released from DEFA's foundation through the construction of the Berlin Wall, antifascism remained an essential theme. However, the meaning and definition of antifascism changed dramatically over the course of East Germany's early history. In DEFA's earliest days, antifascism was a confrontation of Germany's Nazi past and argued that capitalism was a forebearer to fascism. As the East German state formed, antifascism evolved, casting America and its unchecked capitalism as the enemy to democracy. Here DEFA films still confronted Germany's dark past, though the end goal of the films was to promote hope and direction to misguided capitalists and have them achieve a sort of socialist enlightenment. In the mid-1950s, the antifascist theme changed once more. By this time, films demonized their Western neighbor instead of the more distant America as a tangible threat to their future. Furthermore, capitalists were no longer able to be saved from the corrupting power of their own greed. These sentiments eventually culminated in the physical separation of East and West Germany by the Berlin Wall. In this thesis, I will argue that East Germany's definition of antifascism changed dramatically from 1946 through 1961, in part as a reaction to historical events. I will do this through detailed analysis of DEFA films and through tracing the usage and media coverage of one of DEFA's most pronounced films: *The Murderers are Among Us*.

The historiography surrounding DEFA, its films, and the many people involved with them has only recently become part of the discussion of East German history. As recently as the 1980s, East German film studies had been monopolized primarily by art historians – and in these works, Eastern films had traditionally been deemed the lesser industry of the two post-war Germanies. In many ways, John Sanford's 1980 book *The New German Cinema*, embodies these complaints. The focus of the book is on seven directors – all of whom spent their careers in West Germany. During the obligatory chapter on the history of German cinema, there are no explicit mentions of DEFA – instead opting to briefly mention how the USSR took advantage of the established Nazi film industry postwar. After this point, Sanford returns to discussing the

West and how post-WWII they were handed a “sickly film industry.”⁶ This complaint is still relevant in recent years; even the 2008 book *The Historical Dictionary of German Cinema* has limited discussion of the history of DEFA or its films.⁷ Even its list of “The 100 Most Significant German Films,” East Germany is significantly underrepresented with a total of ten films, four of them belonging to one director – Wolfgang Staudte – and only two films from the decades of the 1950s and 60s.⁸

Perhaps the most exceptional work from an art history perspective is Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel’s *The German Cinema*. It does a respectable job of discussing important films, their production, and the history of the art of filmmaking through the various eras of German history. Though it too places a heavy focus on West German films in the period immediately following WWII, there is a clear effort to incorporate the Russian Zone films – even though DEFA is only explicitly mentioned on a few pages. When DEFA is covered, it is done predominantly to discuss *Trümmerfilme* (“Rubble Films”) – a genre of films situated in postwar Europe that were often filmed among the ruins and focused on themes of antifascism and war guilt. Manvell writes on how the most important of these East German *Trümmerfilme* were essential to DEFAs early success and attempts to place them into greater postwar film history.⁹

Despite film growing as a more acceptable historical source, there is no quintessential historical work on DEFA and its films. It appears, unfortunately, that many historical efforts have fallen into a trend of hyper-limited foci. Sebastian Heiduschke’s collection of essays *East German Cinema*, for example, attempts to cover the history of film in the GDR from its roots in 1946 through 1990 and claims to be “an introductory work.”¹⁰ Despite its aim of creating a

⁶ John Sanford, *The New German Cinema* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Imports, 1980), 9.

⁷ Robert C. Reminer and Carol J. Reimer, *The Historical Dictionary of German Cinema* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 26-29. These pages feature the entire history of DEFA from 1960-1990.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 333-337.

⁹ Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The German Cinema* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 103-106.

¹⁰ Sebastian Heiduschke, *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan US, 20130), back cover.

broad discussion, the book suffers immediately from its surprisingly short length (137 pages) and the chapters deviate from this “introduction” approach to instead focus on particular films or genres. For example, the fourth chapter “Fairy Tales and Children’s Films as Eternal Blockbusters: *Die Gesichte vom Kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*, Wolfgang Staudte, 1953)”, centers around the production history and commercial success of this one film – intermixed with brief asides on the importance of children’s films to DEFA. This method continues for discussions on *Apachen* and the “Red Western” genre, *Jakob der Lügner* and DEFA’s approach to the Holocaust (in 1973, which ignores a long history of Holocaust films), and DEFA “renegade films” – with a special focus on the musical film *Heißer Sommer*.¹¹ This highly specific focus disallows a greater discussion on the intricacies between the government, artists, DEFA, and the public.

Despite their usefulness in my research, numerous sources that discuss DEFA fall into a similar trap as above: a narrow focus on genres, directors, time periods, etc. The 1997 documentary *East Side Story*, for example, discusses the role of socialism in the production of Eastern Bloc (mainly East German) musicals.¹² Despite its interesting discourse focusing on how at odds the light, fun musicals of DEFA were in contrast to the East’s political ideology, little can be said of the documentary’s value in the larger discussion of film in the GDR. On a more positive note, Robert Shandley’s 2001 book *Rubble Films* serves as a fantastic source on the legacy of filmmaking in Germany immediately following the Second World War. Its focus on the *Trümmerfilme* genre is certainly well-deserved as this era would impact filmmaking in the East and West for years to come. It has an impressive discussion on the role of film in occupied Germany as a reinterpretation and reconstruction of national identity – something hyper-stressed in Nazi Germany. However, its narrow time frame and focus on very few of the approximately 30 films made in Germany at the time leaves room for improvement. *German*

¹¹ Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, Contents.

¹² *East Side Story*, directed by Dana Ranga (1997; Kino International), DVD.

Postwar Films, a collection of essays edited by Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch, focuses on the post-war period similarly to Shandley's book, though it differs dramatically in its topic. Despite *Trümmerfilme* being a hallmark of German filmmaking from 1946-51, this book chooses to cover the importation of foreign films by the four occupation zones. Though this too is interesting to see (as even though DEFA was prolific in production, many foreign films were imported throughout the GDR's history), there is little focus on the relation of the imported films to those produced by Germany – DEFA included.

Despite the overall trend of limited foci in historical works, Seán Allan and John Sanford's *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992* stands out in part due to its very broad focus. Allan and Sanford have collected an impressively diverse cast of articles that cover themes, directors, specific films, historical overview, interviews with filmmakers, genres, etc. When combined, these seemingly disjointed articles provide an opportunity to see just how large the topic of DEFA's history truly is – what breadth of research is still untapped. They cohere nicely to cover DEFA's lifespan, especially when tying the individual chapters to the contextualization chapter in the beginning. The book aims to “[link] developments in film aesthetics to some of the key historical, political and cultural developments in the GDR” and to “simulate... debates” for future historians.¹³ In this regard, the book succeeds by allowing historians with numerous specialties an open venue to discuss the value of their subject areas and allow the reader to piece them together.

This thesis will combine the benefits of a practical historical approach with aspects of art history. I will avoid discussions focusing on a sole genre or specific directors by focusing, instead, on antifascism through a set time period – specifically 1946 – 1961. In an attempt to add depth to my discussion, I have purposefully selected films from multiple genres for

¹³ Seán Allan and John Sanford, ed. *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 1999), ix.

research including drama, historical, comedy, family, etc. Furthermore, as my thesis is separated into separate smaller periods, I have spread out my film discussion to cover each “era” in detail so as to not permit gaps in continuity. The films chosen were meticulously picked from the wealth of DEFA productions with heavy input from the DEFA Film Library at University of Massachusetts, Amherst and help to paint the changing meaning of antifascism in films produced in East Germany.

There are some inherent flaws in my approach, naturally. Given my specific thematic approach, the documentary and children’s film genres will be hardly touched upon – which considering the prolific output of film in these categories by DEFA is unfortunate. In addition, specific directors (their approaches, conflicts with DEFA, productions, etc.) will be relegated to background information for the sake of keeping my focus on the films themselves. Only immediately relevant directorial information will be used. Lastly, given the large interval of time covered, I must inadvertently cut the amount of films to be discussed in detail in this thesis. This is where the vetting of films by myself, my advisor, Dr. Scott Moranda, and the DEFA Film Library was most valuable as it prevented my research from being muddled by excessive film diatribe and repetition.

This study examines East German newspapers released primarily in Berlin, film magazines, DEFA publications, and (surprise, surprise) DEFA films. Many of these DEFA produced films (as well as the film journals) have been provided by the Hans Joachim Ring Collection from the W.E.B. DuBois Library and the DEFA Film Library – both at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The bulk of these films have been translated thanks to the Film Library’s tireless efforts. When referring to the films, I will first refer to them in their German name, and then use the Film Library’s approved English title. If one is not provided, I will provide my own translation of the title. The films will be referred to in their English titles for the remainder of the thesis. Unlike the films, German names for periodicals and other publications

will remain in their original German. The bulk of these translations will have been done by me, unless otherwise specified. In rare cases, if the original text or speech from films or articles are particularly important or subject to multiple interpretations, excerpts will be included in the original German followed by my English translation.

In many ways, my research would be entirely impossible without several DEFA produced books, particularly the imposing *Die grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme: die vollständige Dokumentation aller DEFA-Spielfilme von 1946 bis 1993*. This collection features plot synopses, production information, reviews, and brief asides about every DEFA feature film ever produced – all conveniently arranged in alphabetical order. It quickly became a trusted reference guide to ground my interpretations of the films discussed henceforth and my contextualization of them in East German history. Another title (one introduced to me in the DEFA Library), was the collection *Mehr Kunst als Werbung (More Art than Advertising)* which features the poster of every film released in the GDR. What makes this incredible is it goes past the obligatory DEFA films and includes all imported films artwork as well – all sorted by year. This allows one to easily see the amount of films released in the GDR each year, in addition to the changing style of advertising through the years.

Using this approach and the above sources, I will work to add an important discussion to the ever-expanding historiography surrounding DEFA. I will focus on the theme of antifascism in these films and trace its evolution from 1946 through 1961. Through discussion mainly on DEFA films and media portrayals of them, including *The Murderers Are Among Us*, I will show that although the GDR sustained an antifascist tradition, their definition of antifascism changed dramatically. Since film was consistently regarded by East German leadership as an essential form of propaganda, I will argue through film that the definition of antifascism changed from 1946 through 1961.

The People's Studio: A Brief History of DEFA

The story of *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft* (literally, “German Film Company”), or DEFA, starts long before their premier films shot in and around the rubble of Berlin, 1945. While much can be said on this long history, the depth of my discussion will be cursory. I aim to introduce concepts and important details that influence later areas of my research. Ultimately, this section will serve to justify and root my focus on the founding of the GDR through 1961.

Starting back in the Weimar Republic, DEFA began its history in 1917 as a film production company named UFA – or *Universum Film AG*. It enjoyed great success through the silent and early talkie film eras, producing films that pioneered many techniques used today and several classics – including *The Blue Angel* and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. Over time UFA grew to be one of the largest (if not the largest) production companies in Germany. In 1927, Alfred Hugenberg (future Chairman of the German National Party) purchased the flourishing film company and used its resources to promote and screen hyper-nationalist newsreels *Wochenschau* and *Tonwoche* to an increasingly nationalist German nation.¹⁴ As the Nazi Party took power, the powerful production company was practically ready-made for Joseph Goebbels to incorporate into the Nazi machine.

As the Nazis seized power in Germany, Goebbels worked to consolidate and nationalize the film industry under the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. As a nationalized company, UFA continued to produce films such as *Triumph of the Will* for the Nazi Party and strictly followed its cultural laws – enjoying great commercial successes as a result. By 1942, the entire film industry was monopolized under one entity: UFI (essentially UFA after absorbing the smaller studios). Here the many resources of UFA were under direct control of the Reich, including UFA’s film studios, animation studios, theaters, and dubbing centers. At this time, Germany’s film industry held the second largest film market in the world – behind only

¹⁴ Manvell, *The German Cinema*, 67.

Hollywood.¹⁵ Despite the size and power of the industry, as WWII neared its end, UFI would face massive destruction.

Postwar Germany was physically, culturally, and spiritually decimated from the invasion. With the recently hyper-nationalist nation now split into four zones of occupation, the citizens began the incredibly long rebuilding process. The path to occupation in and of itself is worthy of historical discussion, though for the sake of my research it is most important to realize that both the Western powers and the Soviet Union agreed to the occupation on the principles of “denazification and democracy” – however, as it came to pass, both sides’ views on “democracy” differed greatly.¹⁶ As a result, the lasting bitterness in these inherent ideological differences left the four zones scrambling to better their own positions, utilizing whatever resources were at their disposal to do so. In the Eastern Sector, the Soviet Union was finding the surviving resources of UFA, in particular Babelsberg Studio and its extensive facilities. Though exact records of what survived in the studio are scarce, it was well known that Babelsberg served to produce the majority of Nazi-era films through 1945. It housed production facilities that would go on to be used for innumerable DEFA feature films, documentaries, children’s films, tv series, etc., in addition to subtitling and dubbing (or voice-over) facilities for the myriad imported films that made up the majority of immediate postwar releases.¹⁷

Though official numbers are sketchy at best, upwards of 140 Soviet feature-length documentaries and films were imported into the East Germany (though at this time it was the Soviet Sector) between 1946 and 1949 compared to the meagre output of 52 German language films produced in the same time.¹⁸ Of that number, twelve of them were rereleases of pre-Nazi

¹⁵ Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 95.

¹⁶ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Reading, MA: Pearson Longman, 2000), 4.

¹⁷ Helmut Ullrich, “Babelsberger Impressionen: Geburtstagsbesuch im DEFA-Spielfilmstudio,” *Neue Zeit*, May 17, 1956.

¹⁸ Heinz Flesch, “Aufführungen aller Spielfilme und abendfüllenden Dokumentarfilme seit 1945,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 10 (October 1959).

era films. What these numbers point to is clear: that the Babelsberg Studio and its many facilities were left surprisingly intact. There is no doubt that the majority of the work on the imported films was done by DEFA, of course with the assistance of *Sovexportfilm* and later *Progress Film-Vertrieb* while the state-run film company built itself up.

This access to facilities was directly responsible for the establishment of DEFA as the only legitimate film industry in Germany for years. DEFA took the established nationalized system and used it to its benefit. This also allowed for the rise of film as potentially the most important form of propaganda the GDR had – an idea to be discussed heavily in later sections. Meanwhile, The British, American, and French sectors all struggled with small industries as they sought to demonopolize the ex-Nazi industry to keep with their more republican ideas of democracy.

With an established studio and the desire to spread their ideas of democracy, the Soviet occupied sector of Germany was officially permitted to form a film industry on May 17, 1946. Already known for creating a number of “Eyewitness” newsreels post-WWII, DEFA was awarded a license to produce from the Soviet military administration and its leader, Col. Tulpanoff (sic.) in a ceremony located in Babelsberg that was “framed by music and cheerful performances.” The event was, unsurprisingly, a political move that served to introduce the German world to DEFA and its role of presenting “political responsibility” in art.¹⁹ Remarkably, though DEFA was first introduced as the official producer of films for the Soviet sector on this date, the film company had already begun work on its first, and possibly most famous, film – *The Murderers are Among Us*.

¹⁹ “Lizenz an erste deutsche Filmgesellschaft,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 18, 1946.

“Spirit of the Accused”: *The Murderers Are among Us* and birth of antifascism in DEFA films,

1946-1949²⁰

As the world began to rebuild after the devastation of World War II, the specter of fascism remained over Europe, colouring everyday life. The occupied German sectors were under constant reminder of the Nazi government and its atrocities, soldiers and rubble setting the backdrop for their daily interactions. It was in this reality that the first DEFA films were being produced in Babelsberg. Understandably, antifascism quickly became the rallying cry of DEFA as war-weary German writers, directors, producers, actors, etc. took to filming the first of many East German films. At this the earliest period of East German cinema, we find that DEFA’s brand of antifascism was at its most pure – a confrontation of the past, a steady hope for the future, and a condemnation of capitalism as the root of fascism.

There is perhaps no DEFA film better remembered than its very first: *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*), directed by Wolfgang Staudte. Filmed in the rubble of post-WWII Berlin, this picture features haunting shots of bombed-out buildings, heaps of debris, dilapidated rooms and shots of people so worn out, so very tired, afraid, and war-torn that it is honestly difficult to determine whether scenes of this film contain documentary footage. Even German newspapers reported on the filming and proclaimed its intense realism. The opening train scene was shot in early May 1946 at Szczecin Railway in Berlin and featured over 200 extras “with backpacks, suitcases and bundles (sitting) around the floor... as if a refugee train had just arrived.”²¹

As a film, *Murderers* borrows stylistic elements of traditional expressionist German films, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu*, which incorporates obtuse structures

²⁰ A quote from: “(Review),” *Tägliche Rundschau*, October 19, 1946, quoted in F.-B. Habel, *Das Grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme* (Berlin, DE: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1999), 414.

²¹ “Wiedergeburt des deutschen Films Die ersten Außenaufnahmen am Stettincr Bahnhof in- Berlin beendet,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 5, 1946.

and oblong shadows to help give the film a dreamlike (in this case not a pleasant dream) state. When watching the film it almost feels like sleepwalking through a dreary wasteland – the rubble is never too far out of sight, and the manner in which characters walk or play on it without any difficulty or a second glance makes it feel oddly and uncomfortably normal. The style also borrows elements from masterful German noir films such as *M*, with its sense of unease and suspicion running throughout.

Before we discuss the film proper, it is important to see how the Germans viewed it before its release. The promotional materials for the film introduce us to the feelings of fear, despair, and confusion inherent in the imagery of *Murderers*. The film's title is in bright red script in the center of the poster, and serves a barrier of sorts. The bottom right corner features the brightly colored face of our protagonist, Susanne. She looks fearfully to the opposite corner, where we see a shadowy silhouette of a man – perhaps our “Murderer”? – in a brimmed hat. The silhouette stands before a bright red/ orange backdrop of some sort of building. In the background we see a black and white illustration of a man standing before what appears to be a rectory, addressing a shadowed audience. Drifting from the top of the rectory, we see spatters of grey drifting into the pitch-blackness of the top right of the poster. At first glance (and considering the Christmas scenes in the film) it is safe to assume this is snow. But considering the coloration of the poster – the sharp reds, oranges, and yellows – and its contrast against a harsh black background, it gives the appearance of soot drifting upwards from a fire (Appendix II).²² This fearful image certainly seems to encapsulate the setting and mindset in which the film was made and premiered shortly after. Feelings of mistrust; this would account for our shadowed figure. Likewise, the grayscale coloration of the rectory stands as a perfect analogy for the destruction and misery that surrounded the people.

²² Helmbold, *Mehr Kunst als Werbung*, 17.

All these details, once again, combine to draw upon the ideas of fear inherent in the film and in the German public post-war. The film does have a second poster (and there may be others from 1946, though if so, they have been lost), and it too carries similar imagery. It features a large, more detailed and shadowed illustration of Susanne in semi-grayscale (her hair and lips do feature very light coloring). The detailed shading of her face gives her a more ragged and haggard appearance than the previous poster, thus giving the illusion that she is covered in dust or dirt – presumably from the debris. With the film's title in large red/ orange block letters under her suspicious, fearful gaze to an unknown area, we clearly see she is wondering: "Who can I trust? Who are the murderers?" (Appendix II)²³

After seeing the posters (and presumably before seeing the film), audiences also had a chance to purchase a program for an additional 20 *pfennig*.²⁴ This booklet carries over many of the posters' themes – though it features scenes of the film in a slightly doctored format. The cover is in black and white and appears to be modeled after film-noir in its composition, namely due to the usage of shadow and fog/ mist in the image. The cover does, however, have some carry-overs in imagery – namely that of the silhouetted man in brimmed hat and overcoat. Standing before him once again is Susanne, her face betraying some discontent. Though no explicit emotion can easily be read, the shadows make her look dazed or in shock. Coupled with the font of the title, which appears written as if it were scratched with a knife in sharp italic font only adds to the dreary and suspicious tone.

The interior of the booklet features numerous shots from the film including (in the top and bottom center, respectively) the now famous shot of the protagonists, Susanne and Mertens, standing at night among the eerily lit rubble of Berlin and the rectory scene displayed on the earliest poster. Other scenes typically feature Susanne or other characters covered in

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ *Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns* (Berlin: Illustrierte Film-Revue, 1946), 4. Box 4, folder 68, Hans Joachim Ring Collection (MS 566). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

shadow and looking blankly in various directions as if suspicious of some vague threat. Those reading the program would then be treated to a decent plot synopsis of the film (not better than mine, I assure you) which ends on the back cover under a close up photo of Susanne – once again seemingly lost in a fog. On her face we see shadowed lines as her vacant eyes are staring upward at an unknown subject. The text ends with a perfect tie to the film’s main theme of antifascism: it claims that as Mertens is “ready to carry out the judgement (of Brückner, our antagonist) himself... Mertens recognizes freedom, humanity, and justice,” unlike the film’s foe.²⁵ Overall, despite the imagery in its promotion (and in its composition) the film carries a message of hope and rebuilding after the war.²⁶

The Murderers are Among Us initially premiered in Berlin October 15, 1946 – around a year and a half after the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. It features clear themes of antifascism, which makes perfect sense considering the state of reconstruction the four sectors of Germany were in. The movie surrounds the tale of young Susanne Wallner, who has just returned to the husk of Berlin from a concentration camp. Upon returning to her old apartment, she finds that ex surgeon-soldier Hans Mertens had taken up residence in her absence. Neither of them willing to leave, they both agree to stay in the apartment while

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ It is reasonable to think that considering the state of affairs in the capitulated Germany, that this dark, shadowy, suspicious tone would be a normal part of all films – or at least their advertising material. After all, art is certainly influenced by society. Alas, this realistic observation has caused me a great deal of consideration. Even considering the hopeful message of the film, the advertising for *Murderers* and the film’s technique portray a deep sense of unease and a feeling of being lost in a nightmare that mimicked traditional German surrealism and could have influenced the entire *Trümmerfilm* movement. While there are more examples of films featuring similar brooding advertising designs (*Marriage in the Shadows*, for example), many others did feature different imagery that sought to promote a hopeful tone before the film was even released – despite their real messages. For example, the third DEFA film *Irgendwo in Berlin (Somewhere in Berlin)*. Its light blue program cover, with title font looking as if taken straight from a postcard, features a relieved soldier hugging his wife. The film itself takes place mostly in daylight and features hope and reconstruction of both towns and families through work. However, the antifascist and antiwar themes are as dark as those in *Murderers*, if not darker – children play war atop the ruins, threatening real harm to one another. One child, on the order of his Captain, climbs a destroyed wall to the very top – almost a hundred feet above the ground – and, in his moment of triumph, falls. The child dies as a military march plays. The film uses the children to highlight the war guilt that Germans felt, the destruction of their youth, and the extent to which war-fervor took over the nation.

Susanne works to assist Mertens in his alcoholism brought on by war-guilt caused by a massacre of Polish women and children he could not stop.

As the film progresses, Mertens is reintroduced to the officer who ordered the slaughter: Captain Brückner. In the short time since the war ended, the Captain has turned to manufacturing and is making healthy profits by turning soldiers' helmets into saucepots. Mertens, still haunted by the past, plots to "demand atonement" for the millions dead from the war – the soldiers and the innocents.²⁷ Towards the end of the film, he gets his chance – he finally decides on Christmas Eve, 1945 to shoot Brückner, but is finally stopped by Susanne. She finishes the film by telling him it is no place for him to pass judgement, and that war criminals like Brückner must instead answer to the court – a clear reference to the upcoming Nuremburg Trials.

Staudte's film uses the characters of Mertens and (especially) Brückner as a means of conveying that capitalism and fascism are inextricably tied. The two are purposefully made to be contrasted to one another. Mertens is the conscious German who has regret for the past actions of the state, and Brückner is the fascist who recalls the "golden days in grey uniforms" and, furthermore, looks to keep a capitalist/ fascist system alive for his own benefit. He seems to view the war and subsequent destruction it caused was normal.²⁸ We are first introduced to Brückner in his miraculous home complete with servants, while we later see his workers and many others struggle to survive in the rubble. He vividly and fondly recalls the memories of war which stands in stark contrast to Mertens who suffers from PTSD due to his experience with war crimes. Simplified, we have those like Mertens who cannot forget what happened in the war, and those like Brückner who feel it was in the past and should be forgotten.

²⁷ *Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns*, directed by Wolfgang Staudte (DEFA, 1946), DVD.

²⁸ Ibid.

We see many scenes in the film that paint this dichotomy perfectly. One prominent scene starts with Brückner reading a newspaper in his remarkably undamaged home. As he sips his tea and noshes on biscuits, he casually flips through the paper headlined with the atrocities of Auschwitz. His face as he reads through the paper is unbothered – pleasant even. A later scene finds Brückner and Mertens going out together to (as the capitalist says) enjoy themselves amid the “godforsaken wasteland.”²⁹ The two aim to go to a club, though to get there they must step through massive mounds of debris and bricks amid husks of buildings. While Mertens steps nimbly, as if he is gliding along the ruin, Brückner is clumsy in every step – though not because of the surroundings. It is instead as if he is so used to his bubble that this may very well be the first time he has ever had to navigate the destroyed area of Berlin, and he is unsure in his footing. He is unfazed by the horrors around him, the club remaining the only thought in his mind.

Regarding the antifascist/ anticapitalist theming of this film, there is perhaps no clearer cut a scene than the ending of the film. Earlier in *Murderers* we are treated to a particularly heart-wrenching flashback where we watch Brückner (at this time a captain in the Nazi Army) and his closest comrades joyously singing Christmas carols around a tree in an elegantly decorated home while flashing to bullet riddled corpses in the snow. This scene references the atrocities that have plagued Mertens for all these years as he was entirely unable to stop the vicious slaughter of women and children that his captain ordered. Towards the end of the film it is Christmas Eve once again, and Mertens finally goes to kill Brückner. We find the ex-captain singing Christmas carols with his factory employees before wishing them a peaceful and joyous Christmas celebration – a sharp contrast to the slaughter he ordered a few short Christmases prior. As Mertens approaches Brückner with a gun, we hear the capitalist begging for mercy, calling Christmas a “time for peace.”³⁰ This is representative of his – and thusly capitalists –

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

duplicitous nature of calling for peace but supporting warmongering and profiteering from suffering. Through the movie Brückner is shown as giving and caring, a kind and gentle man on the outside but at every given opportunity he is reminiscing fondly about his role in WWII. Ultimately, the film seems to tell the audience (presumably Germans shortly after the war) to be wary of capitalist greed and lies – as you may very well find yourself falling into the fascists’ footsteps.³¹

An interesting aside for this film is that the director originally intended for Mertens to kill the captain and get his revenge. However, DEFA required it be changed to feature Susanne stopping Mertens from firing the gun and having him report Brückner as a war criminal.³² The original ending seems to be the more appropriate ending at first glance – especially when looking at the film as a piece of anti-capitalist propaganda. After all, the capitalist appears to reap what he hath sown on the fields of battle and beyond. However, this change is most likely an example of the “Socialist peace” that was heavily propagated through the 1950s; Mertens, and the viewer, are better than Brückner and need to move on from his evil, capitalist ways.

“I Can Afford my Convictions! I’m a Social-Democrat!”: Antifascism as a Call for Peace and a Path to Redemption, 1949-1952³³

The history of *Murderers* does not stop, however, after its release in 1946. Despite the continuance of DEFA’s production of critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Trümmerfilme* throughout the remainder of the 1940s (such as *Marriage in the Shadows* and *The Blum Affair*), *Murderers*’ significance was still palpable. In 1949, the Soviet Sector dissolved

³¹ This and the subsequent paragraph originally appeared in a slightly altered form in another piece I wrote on Christmas in Cold War Germany: Jonathan Herr, “How the Germans Stole Christmas (Back), or how Berliners Maintained Agency in Their Christmas Celebrations during the Height of the Cold War” (seminar paper, State University of New York at Cortland, 2018), 7.

³² *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, directed by Wolfgang Staudte (DEFA, 1946). (This information is available in the Special Features section of the DVD.)

³³ Quote from: *Der Untertan*, directed by Wilfgang Staudte (DEFA, 1951), DVD.

and gave way to the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, or the German Democratic Republic – henceforth referred to as East Germany or the GDR. Headed by the Socialist Unity Party, or SED, the GDR held antifascism as one of its main tenets. However, the true testament to the work of the SED was not just belief in antifascism, but in its instilment of these ideas into the culture of the fledgling nation. The Party turned to cultural institutions such as DEFA to propagate the importance of antifascism in television, writing, plays, and, as we will see further, film.

To their part, DEFA spent the earliest years of East Germany's history as a sovereign state releasing additional artistically meritorious films that still featured antifascism as the source of inspiration. However, as the East German state formed, we find that antifascism as a theme started to evolve. Though the films did still focus on Germany's antifascist past, the specter of an increasingly hostile Cold War seeped into production. 1949 saw the failure of the Berlin Blockade with American candy-bombers and the Berlin Airlift. Even more startingly, in 1950 the Korean War became the first hotspot in the Cold War. As these events raged and political tensions increased, DEFA's antifascist films were influenced by the tangible threat of an invading force – American capitalism. In these films, much as before, capitalism is portrayed as a preamble to fascism. However, now we see it as a corrupting force for German citizens in both the East and West – affecting anyone and everyone. Despite this, these films have an air of hope. There are clear attempts to show that capitalists are not inherently evil, and that redemption through socialism is possible – especially for West Germans who were, according to the GDR, under American control.

Though the East German state did not legally form until October 9, 1949 with the official withdrawal of the Soviet Union, DEFA had already begun its work in May of that year in cementing *Murderers* as a piece of exceptional cultural importance and tying it to the cultural foundations of rebuilding Germany. While celebrating the three-year anniversary of DEFA, the state-run newspaper Neues Deutschland ran an article not only discussing their future but

complimenting its relatively short past. *Murderers* is discussed first and in exceptional terms. Its plot and film style are not discussed, unlike several other mentioned films (including *Razzia* and *No Place for Love*); instead, it is applauded for allowing for “new paths in film to be opened up” before being complimented for its portrayal of characters that the audience could sympathize with – despite the film’s political message. The political nature of the film is not necessarily considered a negative, though, as the article states quote clearly: “*Jeder Film ist politisch*” – Every film is political.³⁴

The first DEFA film was gradually introduced internationally through the 1940s and early 50s (See Fig. 1) and received, at least according to East German publications, massive acclaim. Unsurprisingly, this film was received very positively in the USSR considering its themes. In 1952, this film was shown alongside many newer DEFA films to help tie them to the legacy of *Murderers* – the one film that allowed for the German film industry to show the world that German “*Filmkunst*” (or artistic skill in film) was “awakening to new life.”³⁵ In addition to the East, the film received acclaim in numerous Western states – according to East German sources – such as at showings in Holland in 1952. These showings supposedly met with “great success” – thus signifying not only critical acclaim, but *commercial* success of the art coming from the GDR.³⁶

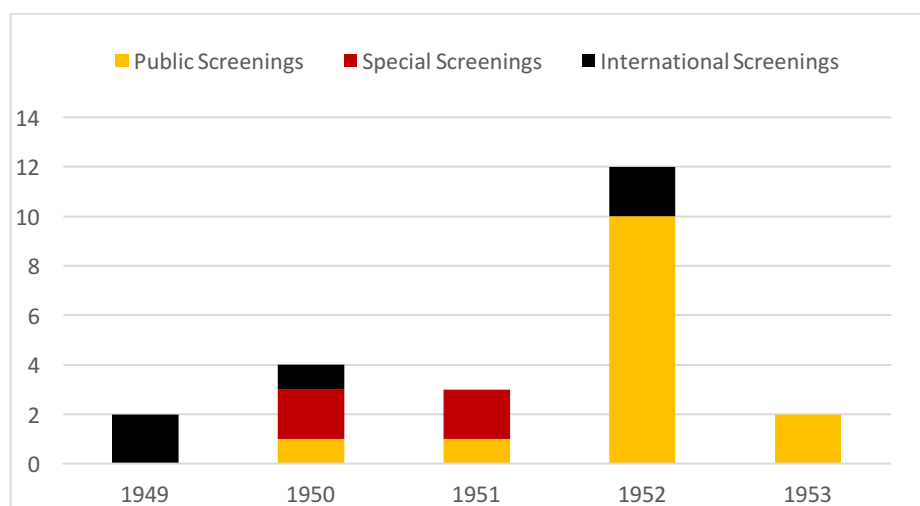
Thankfully, we can corroborate East Germany’s claims of Western success from a number of reviews written in the United States. Save for a few startlingly negative reviews from the *New York Times* calling *Murderers* an “artistic and cultural disappointment” and a “confused and rambling study of disillusionment,” the bulk of reviews do seem to ring true to how East

³⁴ “Eine Filmgesellschaft neuen Mufters? Kritische Betrachtungen zum dreijährigen Bestehen der DEFA,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 17, 1949.

³⁵ “Filmfestspiele der Freundschaft: Von Michail Tschiaureli, Volkskünstler der UdSSR,” *Neues Deutschland*, January 14, 1952.

³⁶ “Kultur-Mosaik,” *Berliner Zeitung*, June 15, 1952.

Germany portrays the film's success.³⁷ While the reviews are not perfectly complimentary – occasionally pointing out directorial flaws – they often overlook these issues and the film's politics for more complimentary discussion. *The Hollywood Reporter*, for example, raved about the filmmaking itself, calling it “admirable considering the difficulties that must have characterized the production,” while *Variety* observed the “performances by the full cast measure up to the highest standards.”³⁸ Given that the majority of Western reviews to Staudte's film are positive, it is only reasonable then to assume that the globally positive reception as reported by the GDR is to be (at least mostly) believed.



(Fig. 1) Graph of publicized screenings of *Murderers*

In these, the earliest years of East Germany's history, *Murderers* held a very important cultural role – predominantly that of depicting Germany's troubled recent history. In addition to

³⁷ A.H. Weiler, “By Way of Report: Post-War German Film Below Par – Addenda,” *The New York Times*, Oct 20, 1946. This first quote is striking in that it was presented by an “observer” in Berlin who saw the original premiere. The American premiere was not until two years later. The second quote is a review from the American premier: T.M.P. “The Screen: Film From Germany,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1948.

³⁸ Excerpts quoted in: “The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948,” American Reviews, DEFA Film Library, 2016, <https://ecommerce.umass.edu/defa/sites/default/files/The%20Murderers%20Are%20among%20Us%20on%20US%20and%20UK%20Screens%2C%201948%281%29%20copy.pdf>.

being the first postwar German film, it was also the first (and thus the model to follow) to depict postwar guilt and memory. As the themes of antifascism were incorporated into the very foundation of the GDR upon its creation, DEFA's films were tied into the identity of the nation. As such, *Murderers* was on the front lines for much of the early history of East Germany.

When we look at discussions of the film in newspapers during these early years, many of them follow simple tangents – primarily those of its importance of supporting peace and comparing it favorably to the artistically bankrupt West Germany. As will be discussed, these two aims were not exactly disconnected. The presence of peace in media became especially prevalent starting in 1950 with the active roles of the USSR, US, and other UN nations on either side of the Korean War. As I have discussed in other areas of my research, this time period was marked culturally with “peacemongering” – or the active insistence through propaganda on both the East and West sides of the world that their governments were more peaceful than the “others.” During the Christmas seasons in particular when “Peace on Earth” sentiments reign supreme, it was not uncommon for the East and West to attempt to out-peace each other through signage, celebrations, and special broadcasts.³⁹

East Germany, for its part, took up the mantle as a peacemonger throughout the year with its usage of film as a means of promoting their insistence on peace. Though explicit articles on both *Murderers* and the Korean War are rare, it is important to note the role of *Murderers* in discussions of peace beforehand. Staudte's film, for example, was shown at a special event in May, 1950 put on by the Society of German-Soviet Friendship that featured the film followed by a lecture discussing its importance – this all a little over a month before the official start of the Korean War.⁴⁰ Though I am unable to find additional content on the event, it is undoubtable that the film and its themes of antifascism were used to tie East Germany to Soviet ideas of

³⁹ Special to the New York Times, “Peace’ is Two-Edged in Sectors of Berlin,” New York Times, December 25, 1952. And “Holiday Messages Beamed at ‘Curtain,’” *European Stars & Stripes*, December 25, 1952.

⁴⁰ “Gesellschaft für Deutsch-sowjetische Freundschaft,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 4, 1950.

peace. Furthermore, with the knowledge of the recently failed socialist insurgency in South Korea still fresh in the minds of the Soviets and their satellite allies, it is very likely that the increasingly tense Korea situation came up.

As the Korean War officially started the following month, DEFA films, including *Murderers* and the recently released *Council of the Gods*, were used by East German newspapers to discuss their ideals of peace. Though the Korean War was not explicitly mentioned, one opinion piece in Berliner Zeitung called for the East German government to show *Murderers* (as well as other politically poignant films such as the Soviet-made *Storm over Asia*) for free in public followed by lectures so Germany and its citizens could learn of the East's "struggle for peace and progress."⁴¹ This opinion piece is particularly interesting to review. For starters, it weighs heavily the goals of peace through art. Those calls for public screenings of *Murderers* would not, however, be satisfied (as far as my sources show). The film would gain immense traction over the next few years, seeing almost weekly showings in cinemas around East Berlin. Even though the call for a public screening went unheeded, it is interesting to consider why this writer was calling for the film. At the time of this article, there was still great fluidity in populations and travel between East and West Germany. Given the presence of West Germans in East Germany, it is very likely that publications, such as Berliner Zeitung (which despite its socialist leanings was not an official party organ) were purchased and read by West Germans. The call for peace through access to East German culture was published on the second page, making it more prominent to the reader than if it had been placed later.

It is important to consider that part of the intended audience consisted of West Germans whom they were attempting to win over – not only East Germans who had already bought into the GDR's ideology and definition of "peace." Perhaps the references to *Murderers* in articles such as these were deeper than just calls for peace through education. Considering

⁴¹ Werner Schmidt, "Freie Diskussion: Geht der Kassenerfolg vorf," *Berliner Zeitung*, August 25, 1950.

once again the theme of antifascism, it is important to review the film's role and significance in what was a cultural vacuum left after WWII. By recalling this film in particular – its message of antifascism, its setting of Berlin only five years prior to the article's publication – the article was drawing on very real fears of war. The use of *Murderers* was pitting Germans into two camps: those who did not forget the war, like Dr. Mertens, and sought peace against those who were (in East Germany's mind) the aggressors – the Brückners of this world.

Though, once again, Korea is not mentioned explicitly in this piece, the call for peace is undoubtedly tied to the war at hand – and the fear that it could lead Germany at large into another armed conflict. However, when reading the piece, it is clear that the author feels that Germany is undergoing an invasion of sorts – one of a cultural nature. The author remarks in horror at the sudden resurgence of Nazi-era films playing in cinemas throughout East and West Germany. Despite the films selected being innocuous as best (such as banned sleeper-musical *Große Freiheit*, or *Great Peace*), the author criticizes the films as holding “more or less hidden Nazi spirits” that should not be unleashed upon the public.⁴² Though it is not the films themselves that are being blamed for this trend, it is instead (according to the author) the cash register that has led to more and more of these films being “discovered.”⁴³ This once again can be tied directly to antifascism as seen in *Murderers*, where the capitalist Brückner uses his fascist past to his benefit by turning soldiers' helmets into saucepots. According to the author, the aware East German citizenry have the ability for “self-reflection” much as protagonists like Mertens in DEFA films.⁴⁴

It is not only Nazi-era films, however, that were of concern to DEFA and the GDR at the time, however. Numerous other articles concur with the aforementioned opinion piece and even take their concerns of cultural invasion a step further. For example, several articles

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

fearfully cover the seeming onslaught of imported films that (according to one) numbered over 600 between 1950-1951 (this number is highly dubious when considering other readily available sources).⁴⁵ The article then continues on calling for a solution to the barrage in part by hoping for import restrictions. Overall, the articles seem to be airing concerns about the overwhelming presence of imported films in the still physically and *culturally* rebuilding Germanies. However, upon closer inspections, the concerns reveal the roots to a deeper-seeded goal – that of promoting the artistic and cultural superiority of antifascist East Germany.

When viewing articles discussing art in the West, it is impossible to miss the immediate criticisms. As one article proclaims, you don't need to be a staunch supporter of East German films to "find that more DEFA than West German postwar films are liable to stick in your memory."⁴⁶ The article then lists a few titles including *Murderers*, as well as other DEFA classics such as Staudte's second film *Rotation* and another rubble film *Marriage in the Shadows*. It is evident through these articles and numerous others that the SED and DEFA viewed their films as culturally and morally superior to West German productions.

Criticisms of the West, however, are not limited to West Germany. In fact, it appears that the bulk of the criticism falls upon America for its cultural invasion. It is important to note that these articles still refer to "the American occupation policy" by name; this implies that the FRG (or West Germany) was potentially not a legitimate state – that it was controlled by an American regime.⁴⁷ Ironically, the articles' criticisms of American culture and film imports to West Germany are not applied to the wealth of Soviet film imports in the early years of the GDR. In the period of 1949-1952 alone East Germany imported 77 Soviet films, not including

⁴⁵ "SOS ohne Hoffnung," *Neue Zeit*, October 11, 1950.

⁴⁶ "Bergabwärts: Katzenjammer über die westdeutsche Katzenjammer Filmkrise über aie...," *Berliner Zeitung*, September 15, 1950. (Note: This article's title is an approximation due to the poor quality of the preserved newspaper).

⁴⁷ "SOS ohne Hoffnung," *Neue Zeit*, October 11, 1950.

documentaries, which accounted for the vast majority of films in the GDR.⁴⁸ Additionally, it is especially important to note that West Germany was legally a nation almost half a year earlier than East Germany, which itself was almost celebrating its first year as a nation at the publishing of this article.

Luckily for the suffering, artistically deprived West Germans, their neighbor was producing “important films for the development for our people.”⁴⁹ However, despite the proximity and seeming logic of importing films from their German neighbor, DEFA films were not frequently shown in West Germany at this time. Releasing their 50th film after only six years of production, DEFA still lamented how only very few were released in the West. In fact, by April 1956, ten years after the premier of *Murderers*, only 20 DEFA films had been exported to their capitalist neighbor – out of at least 100 productions. In contrast, 52 had been exported to Poland, 58 to Austria, and 62 to Hungary.⁵⁰ This issue also presents itself in special showings, such as during the Berlin Film Festival in 1951. Despite Soviet films being shown in the Cannes Film Festival that year, DEFA films were not permitted to be shown at the Berlin Film Festival. As a frustrated writer for Neues Deutschland points out: “*Was für Cannes recht ist, sollte für Berlin billig sein*” – “What is right for Cannes, should be cheap for Berlin.”⁵¹ All in all, DEFA appeared to be struggling to gain a larger German audience to share their films, and thus, their ideologies.

While screenings of *Murderers* were ever increasing up through 1952, DEFA continued to produce a wealth of films that confronted fascism. Many, including the films *Council of the*

⁴⁸ Heinz Flesch, “Aufführungen aller Spielfilme und abendfüllenden Dokumentarfilme seit 1945,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 10 (October 1959), 316.

⁴⁹ Rosemarie Rehahn, “Schatten über den Inseln: ...DEFA-spielfilm aufgeführt,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 18, 1952. (Note: This article’s title is an approximation due to the poor quality of the preserved newspaper).

⁵⁰ DEFA, “Export von DEFA-Spielfilmen: von 1946 bis April 1956 – insgesamt 650 Filmabschüsse,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 5 (May 1956), 160.

⁵¹ “Ja, warum sollte man nicht?: Westdeutsche Stimmen zum gesamtdeutschen Film / Warum die Einheit der Filmschaffenden notwendig ist,” *Neues Deutschland*, September 16, 1951.

Gods and Our Daily Bread, continued the fight to uncover fascism's roots in capitalism. However, they also seemed to continue where *Murderers'* story left off by constructing a better, brighter antifascist future.

In the 1949 Slatan Dudow film *Our Daily Bread*, we are reminded straight away what defined fascism in this time: capitalism. Though this is not a new trend by any stretch. Through a socialist/ communist lens, fascism is essentially unchecked capitalism to its furthest extent. This is a cornerstone to the film and other films from the GDR. For this film to feature such overt anticapitalist theming was not only a condemnation of fascism, but also a condemnation of the role capitalism plays in the creating a fascist nation. Germany's recent history under the Third Reich, for example, was blamed in part on unchecked capitalism. In particular, we see how these antifascist ideals lead to the construction of a better future – specifically one in the Soviet sector and, eventually, the GDR.

Our Daily Bread features numerous elements of *Trümmerfilme* in its composition, predominantly in that it is unafraid to show the effects of war physically, socially, and psychologically. Laborers in one scene ride a subway that is packed to its limit, then are forced to cross a makeshift wooden bridge while the camera spends time focusing on the destroyed metal bridge in the background. The laborers finally all rush to board a trolley car; the many people who are unable to board are forced to hang on to the outside in desperation.⁵²

The film proper surrounds the story of Ernst and Harry, two young men who live as part of an extended family (or “refugee camp” as Harry refers to the group as) in a less-destroyed area of Berlin post-WWII. The two men represent complete ideological opposites with Ernst working to rebuild a factory and receiving no pay as he does so, and Harry representing selfish desire and capitalism in his recruitment by a shady firm for illicit (paid) work. The two are surrounded by a cast of characters such as their father and their sister, Inge – both of whom

⁵² *Unser täglich Brot*, directed by Slatan Dudow (DEFA, 1949), DVD.

undergo transformations. The bulk of the film shows the father and Harry insulting Ernst for his choice to labor at reconstructing the factory, despite its lack of pay. This is a clear ideological dispute as evidenced in numerous scenes – in particular the famous dinner scene.

Here we are witness to the most dogmatic of ideological discussions in the film. Even more importantly, we are able to view the argument from both sides. We see the desire for the family to have more money – which was, and at the time of the film’s release still is, a genuine concern for the people. However, we also see the desire by the communist to work for the common good, eschewing financial rewards for what he feels is the right thing to do for the rebuilding German nation. What follows is a scene of dialogue spliced with additional information:

F(ather): “Nobody ever got anywhere just by senselessly toiling away.”

H(arry): “I’d like to know why you work all day if you don’t make any money.”

F: (mockingly) “For the others.”

E(rnst): “Yes, and the others do it for me!”

F: “Doesn’t seem to do much good.”

H: “You have to think of yourself first.”

F: “That’s the only sensible way to see it!”

... (what follows is continued criticism of Ernst for his decision making and praise of Harry – who was a soldier in WWII)

F: “We’d have more if you did like Harry, rather than dig in the ruins.”

E: (shouting) “If Harry did as I’ve always done, there’d be no ruins!”

...

E: “You ruined your world yourselves. Now we have to clear the rubble so we can get started again.”⁵³

The scene above is remarkably blunt in its tying of capitalism to fascism with Ernst’s comparisons to the selfishness of Harry to his and other soldier’s acts of war and destruction. There is a reason for this, as this scene marks a critical junction of sorts for the main characters.

⁵³ Ibid.

It is after this point where Harry doubles-down on his selfish ways and begins to conduct illicit business to further advance his own life, much to the detriment of his family. Meanwhile, Ernst and Inge work at the factory without pay, to the dismay of the father. He represents old-school capitalism – not the harsh, fascist capitalism of Harry. He appreciates the need for the factory but expresses his concerns that a socialist system is not feasible.

F: “I didn’t make the times.”

E: “You don’t try to change them!”

F: “Oh, your socialist pipe dreams are better?”

E: “This isn’t about socialism... It’s about building a peaceful economy. One run by the people.”⁵⁴

Of course, this factory by the people does come to fruition – and as such does indeed listen to the workers. Throughout the film, the workers are given inspirational speeches by their leader – a selfless love interest for Inge (as this is still a drama) who preaches the socialist way and hopes to be a face of the company, not its ruler. As the film winds down, the factory stands as a pillar of hope – something the family at large is lacking. Henry is so caught up in crooked business he murders a man, and then unknowingly mugs his father for bread out of desperation. In his shame brought on by his crippling debt, familial and social isolation, and misery, he kills himself. Meanwhile the father, struggling to make ends meet in the post-war situation and now missing large chunks of his family due to their political allegiances, finally accepts a job at the very factory he mocked as its financial chair. He finally gives in to his wife’s insistences to work with Ernst as more and more places are going socialist successfully – and to work with his family would be a pleasure.

At the end of the film, we finally see the absolute success of the socialist system. Time jumps to the first day of finished production in the factory. We see the father and Ernst standing next to each other in the father’s apartment, smiling – the only thing between them in

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the shot is a framed photo of Karl Marx (no one said DEFA's strong point was subtlety). It is incredibly telling to have the three in one shot. The father's acceptance of the socialist lifestyle was a hard-fought one, but he now understands its appeal and appreciates it. He has rejected his capitalist past and its fascist ties – and has joined an ideal socialist family. The two go to the factory to celebrate alongside thousands of workers, their families, and bystanders while the factory rolls out tractors – itself a reference to the (then in progress) land reform movement. Workers cheer vigorously with banners unfurled: “More tractors, more bread!”⁵⁵ The desire and need for foodstuffs, for survival, is paramount still – though the socialist system is delivering its promises of hope for the future. When this moment of glory and optimism is contrasted to the capitalist system that led to immediate wealth and gain, but prolonged misery and misfortune (as evidenced in Harry's story) the message is clear. The film promotes the construction of a socialist Germany and points to the corrupting power of capitalism. Yet, even those who embrace capitalism can see the light of socialism.

The film is very clearly antifascist – in that it is anticapitalist. However, the film is not entirely unaware of the concerns of the people and it acknowledges the appeals of capitalism to suffering Germans. The socialist system is shown as slow moving as we see with the factory's slow reconstruction efforts. The workers in the beginning had worked there for a minimum of three weeks without pay – a number leaving because: “I can work for that anywhere,” or, “I can't afford to work for nothing.”⁵⁶ The film does not criticize these concerns about the slow process; instead, it rewards those who stay with even more work and the hope of a prosperous future *despite* these concerns.

What makes this film unique is that it does not necessarily vilify capitalists at large. It appreciates their fears – their concerns. It is not the West Germans or even truly *capitalism* that

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

is the enemy; rather it is those who use capitalism crookedly. Capitalism unchecked leads to selfishness which leads to a fascist system, such as the Nazi system Harry fought to maintain. Rather than accusing all capitalists of fascism, however, the film offers a path for reasonable capitalists to learn of the socialist system and be redeemed within it. We even see victimization brought on by capitalism. The need for money and to “earn their keep” leads one of the father’s nieces to turn to prostitution out of desperation. There is a mix of sentiments to feel about this character, however. We feel disgust at her choice to willingly pursue and enjoy the wealth that prostitution gained her. Then, towards the end, we see her “wait(ing) for my Captain” – her rescue from the life she desperately wants out of, but is in too deep to leave. We feel fear and pity as an elderly, overweight businessman smiles grimly at her and she, unable to decline his favors, smiles weakly and accepts her position.⁵⁷ In *Our Daily Bread*, we learn so much of the evils of capitalism and, moreover, how they are the roots of fascism. Under a capitalist system, workers are exploited, families are damaged beyond repair, and society becomes corrupt. It is only through socialist labor and peace that people can rise above this system – and potentially overcome the horrors of the past.⁵⁸

These themes are also evident in other DEFA films from this time. Few films hold as much power in the lexicon of DEFA films as *Council of the Gods*, released in 1950. The film was directed by famed DEFA director Kurt Maetzig and is frequently hailed alongside *Murderers* and *Marriage in the Shadows* as one of the greatest early DEFA films. *Council*, follows the ideas of early antifascism almost verbatim with its historical plot. The plot surrounds the true story of IG Farben, a German chemical company that in WWII produced lethal chemicals used by the Nazis.

Antifascist discussion starts immediately, technically before the film even begins with a dedication to “*Den Freunden des Friedens in aller Welt*” – or the “the friends of peace all over

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Many other DEFA films in this era feature similar themes, including *Destinies of Women* and *Story of a Young Couple*.

the world.”⁵⁹ As the film progresses, we quickly learn who does not belong to the “Friends of peace.” The title *Council of the Gods* refers to a group of prominent businessmen and class elites who rule over the interests of Germany before and during WWII. It is a direct reference to how they, as the “gods” of the nation, were above the perceived peasantry and the petty concerns – this being a major theme as the film wears on. According to the film, these elites felt they could control Hitler and use him to prevent “the Red peril” from taking over Germany in the 1930s. It is in their direct interests to have him take power as the rearmament campaign would lead to their individual increased wealth. This opening and the portrayal of the Council ties back directly to earlier discussions of peacemongering, where the GDR claimed peace and friendship as its founding principles, weaponizing these ideals against, in this case, capitalist interests and fascism.

The film’s story surrounds Dr. Scholz – the leading chemist at IG Farben who is renowned for his work with chlorine gas. We as viewers are meant to identify with him and his pursuit for science – though at the same time we find ourselves unable to hold back any critique as he refuses to question where his work with the gas goes. His insistence that neutrality is the same as being peaceful is his primary driving force as he continues his work. This blindness does not last for long, however, as he must learn to confront his role in the creation and manufacturer of lethal gases used in concentration camps. The film hits a fever pitch with the war ending and what is clearly meant to be the Nuremburg Trials taking place and our hero Scholz, guilt-ridden that his work was used for evil, accepting blame for the gas – though also pinning blame on all of Germany, especially IG Farben. Amid this chaos, IG Farben continues production of chemicals and explosives as it had during the War – that is, until a massive explosion rocks the building, leaving many dead. Scholz leads a group to resist the production of more weapons while the chairman of IG Farben flees for his life. Upon reporting

⁵⁹ *Der Rat der Götter*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (DEFA, 1950), DVD.

to the Council of the Gods of his failure at calming the incensed crowd, the American capitalist suggest bringing in tanks and tear gas to break up the incensed crowd. The Chairman balks at the suggestion and the film's story ends.⁶⁰

Following this scene, the film ends with a similar message to that of the beginning. We find a peaceful march in Germany (using documentary footage presumably from a World Peace Day event) featuring oppressed peoples of the world and their sympathizers holding signs and expressing their love of peace. "For Freedom, Unity, and Democracy!", "Friendship to all peoples, peace to the world!", "Solidarity compels Peace!" – these messages adorn trucks and signs as black men and women from America march down the street, smiling and waving to large, cheering crowds. Scottish men in kilts follow to similar applause. Cubans (interesting considering this was at minimum three years before the Cuban Revolution started) and black South Africans drive down the same road as well, filling up large open-bed trucks and waving to crowds of onlookers. The message is clear: East Germany appreciates peace for all peoples – even those that America and its allies neglect and oppress. And thus, the antifascist message is crystal clear.⁶¹

This limited synopsis does little to truly show the intricate workings of this film and barely glosses over the Chairman of IG Farben, Scholz' Communist uncle, the American prosecutor, and the media circus of the trial at large. One particularly powerful scene features Scholz learning of the lethal capacity of the gas he has been working on. In a demonstration requested by the Chairman, Scholz watches as a puppy, a chicken, and a lamb are placed a small chamber. While the soundtrack fades and is replaced with a shrill shriek, we watch through Scholz' eyes as the chamber fills with gas and the animals slowly die. It's a harrowing scene, even fictionalized – and immediately the viewers have no sympathy to the ruthless

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

company. The symbolism of the animals should not be lost either. Here we have a company willing to kill baby animals – the literal embodiments of peace and happiness. The lamb recalls images of the Lamb of God a spiritual embodiment of peace. Though speculative, the eager killing of the lamb could very well be imagery for the godlessness of the Council of the Gods and their willingness to destroy peace for profit.

Despite his cruelty and insatiable greed, the Chairman is clearly not the true enemy of the film. That role is inhabited by the Americans. As it turns out, they and their economic, military, and political interests are the true fascists – far more so than the sinister Council. The ending scene of the film is instrumental in showing this. While throughout the whole film the Chairman of IG Farben has been shown as deceptive and malicious in his pursuit for capitalist gain – even when confronting the hordes of onlookers at the exploded factory. Despite this, when it comes to the suggestion of using direct violence against the German people, even he shows a glimmer of mercy (and thus, hope for retribution). It is the shady American businessman who makes the initial suggestion of using force and is held to be the final, ultimate evil. Despite American business interests remaining the true culprit, not all Americans are shown as villains in the film. As we have seen already, the end parade has traditionally maligned populations in East Germany enjoying celebrations of peace and love. Mr. Wood, the American prosecutor during the trial, is also shown in a positive light. He appears to be the only one attempting to convict the Chairman of war crimes in the manufacture of lethal gasses and explosives. Despite his best efforts, he is replaced by the villainous military authorities of America for his attempts at “revealing (their) shit.”⁶² The “shit” in question refers to the supposed active collusion between American economic interests and IG Farben leading up to and during the second World War.

⁶² Ibid.

Although we are given brief glimpses of humanity shown by Americans and the capitalists, the ultimate point of the film is still to cast an image of the Americans as partly to blame for WWII and keeping fascism alive afterwards. In an attempt to add veracity to this aim, the film opens with a note claiming the entire movie is true and based on minutes of the Nuremberg Trials as well as “other American sources” that remain unspecified.⁶³ The dramatization of the Trial is clearly a centerpiece of the film and bears the most weight against the Americans and the Council. The Trial of IG Farben was technically not part of the Nuremberg Trials proper, as it was held subsequently by the American military authorities and not the International Military Tribunal. This quickly becomes important as before the trial begins in the film, we see the arrested Chairman and his cohorts living luxuriously with massages and absolute autonomy and freedom of movement in the American controlled prison.⁶⁴ The film’s version of the Trial makes it abundantly clear that East Germany viewed the event as a kangaroo court. One character idly draws caricatures during the “funny old trial” while the American prosecution hardly attempts a fair and proper trial.⁶⁵ Given the real life verdict of the trial where sixteen of the twenty-five accused were either acquitted or sentenced to two-years or less in prison (including time served), the East German reaction was certainly justified – especially given the wealth of evidence against the company.⁶⁶

Despite the largescale drama that surrounds this Trial, the film gets its message across clearly: the Americans manipulated the Trial from the onset and the economic, political, and military interests had been involved from the very start. Even *Council’s* promotional material focuses heavily on American and Allied involvement with IG Farben. In the film program a piece

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ I would highly suggest reviewing the transcript of the case yourself if interested. It is a dense read (and takes a long time) but I can fully appreciate the outrage of the East Germans. Nuernberg Military Tribunals, *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribuanls Under Control Council Law No. 10*, Vol. VIII: “The I.G. Farben Case,” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1952), https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_war-criminals_Vol-VIII.pdf.

titled “Die IG Farben verdiente am Bombardement deutscher Städte” (IG Farben Profited from the Bombing of German Cities) makes detailed claims with evidence that due to a deal during WWII “between Standard Oil (America), Royal Dutch Shell (England) and IG Farben (Germany),... IG Farben received a share of profit equal to that of Standard Oil from all aviation fuel produced in the US.”⁶⁷ The piece even has allusions to a grander conspiracy of the West against the East and socialism, thus further showcasing the fear that the West was actively working against them. According to this DEFA-produced (and thus Party-approved) pamphlet, before WWII officially began, “Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and (French Prime Minister) Daladier (met at the Munich Conference to discuss) the politics of international fascism and the channeling of aggression against the East.”⁶⁸ Here America is shown as an active colluder with Nazis before and during WWII, as well as protecting Nazis post-WWII.

When considering DEFA films released from 1949 through 1952, it is evident that antifascism had changed from its original form in the *Trümmerfilme*, or Rubble Films. At first glance, there are clear similarities, predominantly surrounding the belief in capitalism as a prerequisite to fascism. However, this era finds the specter of capitalism coalescing into a tangible threat – America. Through new films and the reinterpretation of *Murderers*, DEFA accused America and its allies of working alongside fascists in the past and present to preserve a corrupt, evil capitalist system. Yet despite the appearance of a villain in these antifascist discussions, this era was still marked with hope. Much like in their earlier films, DEFA continued to sing the praises of a socialist society. However, what is new in this regard is the path to redemption that is opened by socialism. In this era, we now see that not all capitalists are evil,

⁶⁷ I will not address the validity of this claim. This topic deserves its own proper historical research as there are numerous conspiracies out there supporting it.

Der Rat der Götter (Berlin: Deutscher Filmverlag GMBH, 1950), 11. Box 1, Hans Joachim Ring Collection (MS 566). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

and moreover that it is possible for them to achieve an enlightenment of sorts by accepting the values of a socialist economic system.

**“Revolutionary Ideals will Fail Against my Unbending Will!”:
Revolt and Political Unrest, 1953-1955**⁶⁹

1953 marked an immensely important year for all of the Eastern Bloc nations. The death of Joseph Stalin has been seen as a turning point in East/ West relations when Khrushchev came to power in September of that year. His early pushes for détente and cultural thaw marked somewhat of a decrease in the fears and tensions that marked the rulership of Stalin and the subsequent leadership of Brezhnev. However, these thaws would not come to East Germany for several years yet, as Walter Ulbricht (First Secretary of the SED) continued his harsh cultural policies. In the GDR, the year was marked not only by the death of a political idol, but also (and perhaps more so) by a massive uprising that altered East German social and cultural policy for years and, more relevant to this thesis, substantially impacted film production and the theme of antifascism. As we will see the specter of this Uprising led to the SED influencing DEFA, pushing them to proselytize the superiority of East Germany in ideologically black and white films while they worked to right the ship.

The background of the June Uprising of 1953 in East Germany could be and has been discussed in far greater depth than in this thesis. Its effects, likewise, extend well beyond the scope discussed subsequently.⁷⁰ Despite this, some background knowledge of the Uprising is necessary. The Uprising (also known as “Day X” in East Germany) is commonly attributed to

⁶⁹ Quote from: *Der Untertan*, directed by Wilfgang Staudte (DEFA, 1951), DVD.

⁷⁰ For larger discussions, I highly suggest: Arnulf Baring, *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972)., Richard Millington, *State, Society and Memories of the Uprising of 17 June 1953 in the GDR* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Christian F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York, NY: Central European University Press, 2001).

workers and is said to have occurred in Berlin, June 17, 1953. However, this is already not exactly the truth. In actuality, it lasted for several days and was widespread throughout not only Germany, but the entire Eastern Bloc; its participants ranged across all social classes and occupations.⁷¹

The Uprising itself was quashed by force with soldiers and tanks often violently ending demonstrations. Though its causes are varied and run deep through the history of East Germany, the consensus seems to point to worker unrest in the young regime. There is extensive evidence that the people (namely farmers, traders, and industrial workers) felt oppressed by rules and taxes levied against them as quotas rose and quality-of-life goods and services lessened. The Politburo (a group within the Central Committee of the GDR that controlled day-to-day affairs) had made efforts to address these issues, in part fearing that without the support of the laborers, the new set of five-year plans would not be met. It seems, unfortunately, that these efforts were either too little, or too late.⁷²

Ultimately, Day X ended, though its impacts lived on for a long time and remained a constant fear of Ulbricht's for the remainder of his tenuous tenure. Immediately the event was marked as taboo by the East German regime. References to the event in art forms such as books, theatre, and television were vilified. In some cases, family members of those who were taken for their involvement during the Uprising were barred from mentioning the day or asking about their loved ones for fear of further retribution.⁷³

This, however, did not stop knowledge of the event from spreading. In fact, the SED took active charge on structuring the narrative to implicate Western agents of chaos who sought to overthrow the Communist regime. The SED's official policy stated that the West

⁷¹ Skyler J. Arndt-Briggs, "The Invisible Uprising: Filmmaking and East Germany's 'Day X,'" published in Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski, ed. *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture* (New York, NY: Rodopi B.V., 2011), 42.

⁷² Arnulf Baring, *Uprising in East Germany*, 6-49.

⁷³ Skyler Arndt-Briggs, "The Invisible Uprising," 43-44.

(America and West Germany) used West Germans to infiltrate the East, where they awaited further instructions. On the eve of June 17, they received word and started a failed revolution to reestablish a capitalist, fascist order with the old leaders taking up the mantle over East Germans. Naturally, the SED's tale ended with a stunning victory by the Party who subdued the foreign elements and protected the East from a literal invasion. Here we see how an oppositional or combative mentality toward the West was quickly becoming the norm – something which greatly impacted the themes of antifascism in films in the coming years.

Around the time of Day X, *The Murderers are Among Us* seems to disappear from the public eye – not to mention comparative discussion in the press. According to newspaper sources, showings of the film (at least in Berlin) were severely limited starting in January of 1953, and did not start up again until November of 1954 – even then only showing in cinemas twice through the remainder of the year.⁷⁴ This is a remarkable difference from even 1952 where the film was shown multiple times a month and on several special occasions (Fig. 1). At first, this may seem surprising considering the antifascist and often anticapitalist messages that pervade the film. Given the newfound desire to implicate the West in restoring fascism to the free East, *Murderers* would certainly be a useful tool – and it would most certainly become so again in a few short years.

However, as we have already seen, *Murderers* is a film open to innumerable nuanced interpretations, in part due to its artistic design. Already in the past seven years, *Murderers* and its themes had been reinterpreted to match changing ideas of antifascism. Considering the government's wealth of concerns directly leading up to the Uprising, as well as the fears that plagued the leadership following its suppression, it is not at all surprising that the film disappeared from the public eye. Though the capitalist character of Brückner can easily be

⁷⁴ "Progress-Verlag: Unsere Filmwoche," *Berliner Zeitung*, January 16, 1953. And: "Filmprogramm der Woche," *Berliner Zeitung*, November 26, 1954.

construed as a symbol of the West, to the many East Germans disillusioned and struggling to make ends meet under Ulbricht's system he can just as easily be mistaken for Communist leadership. Given that the film glorifies the struggle of a man who, disillusioned by a system he trusted, plans to use violence to enact retribution, the disappearance of *Murderers* makes sense from a political perspective. This disappearance would last for years – at least until an official cultural statement could be made to solidify the SED's story.

While classic DEFA films were taken off the market, film production continued in earnest.⁷⁵ However, the creation of films at this time was markedly different from that in previous eras and, in many ways, marked a turning point in film production. Following the Uprising, cultural policies received a crackdown – namely in film where there was a newfound desire to avoid “mass agitation via artistic means.”⁷⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the earliest years of DEFA when the production company had handled film production in a manner that allowed directors to enjoy great artistic freedom and autonomy. It celebrated the arts and allowed for films often highly critical of the past and radical in their views to be released – i.e. *Murderers*, *The Blum Affair*, *Council of the Gods*, etc. Over time, however, the Party's policy on films became increasingly constrained starting with the banning of *Das Beil von Wandsbek* (*The Axe of Wandsbek*) shortly after its premier in May 1951, fearing a negative public response to its theming.⁷⁷ This fear of the power of film is clear; once it is tied with the open acknowledgment by the Party and the Politburo of the influence and importance of film in culture, we start to see how films of the time were impacted.

⁷⁵ The reeling nation releasing seven feature films in 1953 and eleven in 1954 – this latter year having the most feature films released by DEFA since 1949. Heinz Flesch, “Aufführungen aller Spielfilme und abendfüllenden Dokumentarfilme seit 1945,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 10 (October 1959), 314.

⁷⁶ Skyler Arndt-Briggs, “The Invisible Uprising,” 46.

⁷⁷ *Das Beil von Wandsbek*, directed by Falk Harnack (DEFA, 1951), DVD. This information is available in the special features.

Aesthetically and creatively, films changed form dramatically during this period. We do still see a focus on the past; however, an increasing number of films began to fall into “schlock” territory – moving away from the artistically meritorious films that marked DEFA up to this point. It appears generally that films were looking more to educate than to entertain, thus pushing them to be more heavy-handed. This, again, can be understood with the Politburo’s acknowledgement of the power of film. The SED and Politburo feared that artistically heavy films with deep subtext like *Murderers* could stoke anticommunist feelings. DEFA was then pushed into creating ideologically heavy-handed films with little to no room for misinterpretation as a countermeasure.

With major changes to the structure, content, and aesthetic of films between 1953 and early 1956, it is easy to consider this time as an aberration, or an interregnum in the flow of our antifascist discussions. This, however, is not the case. Antifascism continued to evolve in this point and remained a hearty theme in DEFA productions. Unlike previous eras, antifascism did seem to take a backseat to the goal of presenting the East as a moral and cultural superior to the West. Despite this, this era is essential to understanding future discussions of antifascism as this period marked a long transition from potential redemption of capitalists to their demonization. Furthermore, we see the perceived source of fascism move from America to West Germany.

Written in 1952 – almost a whole year before the Uprising – Berliner Zeitung featured an article taken from discussions with members of the SED and the Politburo. Appropriately titled: “Der Film ist die wichtigste aller Kunstarten,” or, “Film is the Most Important of all Art Types,” it unsurprisingly starts with expected praise of DEFA’s artistic successes in the past. Yet what is immediately surprising is an unceremonious reference to DEFA’s many “mistakes and weaknesses.” As it turns out, film in the perfect East German nation would focus heavily upon “the struggle for peace and the national Unity of Germany.” Furthermore, the films would

ideally sing the praises of the nation's many "achievements in political, economic and cultural fields." One missed opportunity, remarked the SED, was the lack of films focusing on the "struggles and works of the two greatest Germans: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels."⁷⁸

It seems telling that after Day X, the cultural minds in DEFA who pushed for more artistic creativity and freedom would fall to the political desires of the SED and produce almost exclusively hyper-propagandistic films. Though a film focusing on Marx and Engels would not be produced in this time, we do find that one figure received the special treatment that the Politburo so desired: Ernst Thälmann. Though not a name typically discussed historically, Thälmann achieved fame in East German lore for his role in leading the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) during the Weimar Republic and his creation of and work with *Antifaschistische Aktion* (or Antifa) in the 1930s. His imprisonment by the Gestapo and execution, ordered by Hitler in 1944, elevated him to martyr status – despite his dubious relationship with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and even Walter Ulbricht.

Released in 1953 and 1954 respectively, the Ernst Thälmann biopics subtitled: *Sohn seiner Klasse* and *Führer seiner Klasse* (*Son of the Working Class* and *Leader of the Working Class*, respectively) tell a highly dramatized version of his life and story, and cannot possibly be mistaken in their intent to "educate" the German people. Even the two posters make the films' ideas and stories abundantly clear to viewers. The first film's poster features Thälmann standing stoically on a dock next to a friend, the latter's face twisted in a dumbfounded look – as if Thälmann had come up with a radical thought. The background is a subdued blue with a grey sky hanging over the two. Here we see his humble beginnings. Thälmann's face is the center of the film's poster, staring out into the distance to what was clearly a better future (and hopefully a better film). At this point, as the title suggests, he was truly a son of the working class. He was

⁷⁸ "Der Film ist die wichtigste aller Kunstarten: Resolution des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED I Für den Aufschwung einer fortschrittlichen deutschen," *Berliner Zeitung*, July 29, 1952.

among them – though he had hopes to lead them to something better than their blue/ grey lives.⁷⁹

The second film's poster is significantly more triumphant than the first – appropriate as the film celebrates Thälmann as a champion of the working class. The background is bright red with white surrounding our hero. The color is perfect as Thälmann was a noted Stalinist throughout his life. He stands tall in the center of the poster – trading his winter coat and friend from the previous poster for a suit and a horde of workers lined in a row below and behind him. Here he has taken charge, his eyes still staring slightly upward to the future, though his clenched left fist gives him a more active vibe. He is clearly willing to fight – and it appears the workers behind him are ready to take up arms with him. Thälmann's deification in the poster was absolute and leaves little room to view him as anything other than a Father of the GDR.⁸⁰ The films lean very heavily into their propagandistic, prosocialism message and were clearly designed to instill an appreciation of East German history to the people, as well as to inspire pride and love for the socialist system. With Thälmann as the hero against the fascist Nazis, it demonizes the past and fascists – particularly the capitalist system at large.⁸¹

The Thälmann biopics are by no means DEFA's only films that rely heavily on the past – which seems to be a remnant of their earlier era of filmmaking. Productions focused on topics ranging from resisting Bismarck's Socialist Laws in the 1890s to documentaries on German figures such as Beethoven.⁸² While these films (especially the biopics on traditional German figures) tended to proclaim East Germany as the heir apparent to classical Germany, antifascist messages continued. In fact, numerous films deliberately portray the West as enemies –

⁷⁹ Helmbold, *Mehr Kunst als Werbung*, 75.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁸¹ *Ernst Thälmann – Sohn seiner Klasse*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (DEFA, 1954), DVD. And *Ernst Thälmann – Führer seiner Klasse*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (DEFA, 1955), DVD.

⁸² *Die Unbesiegbaren*, directed by Artur Pohl (DEFA, 1953), DVD. *Ludwig van Beethoven*, directed by Max Jaap (DEFA, 1954), <https://cortland.kanopy.com/video/ludwig-van-beethoven-ludwig-van-beethoven>.

whether America or West Germany. In a surprisingly engaging film *Gefährliche Fracht* (*Dangerous Freight*) released in 1954, we see a story of an American ship entering West Germany filled with napalm bombs instead of its expected cargo. Though the Western dock workers refuse to unload the dangerous freight (roll credits!), the American occupying forces (and their capitalist leaders) manipulate a worker who is struggling to make ends meet to help them in their nefarious aim. Here the Americans are portrayed once again as the enemies of peace, and the West German lead is shown as sympathetic despite giving in.⁸³

However, Americans were not the only foes of German citizens according to DEFA films. Possibly as a response to the suspected involvement of West Germans in the Uprising, West German capitalists emerge as villains. The 1954 film *Alarm im Zirkus* (*Alarm at the Circus*) finds two West German boys in poverty being hired by a shady West German bartender for a mysterious job – of course located in the East. One of the boys catches wind that this job is in fact a robbery, and then sets out to stop the crime and help his new East German friends. Plot wise, the film is exactly as innocuous and inoffensive as it seems, and its antifascist message is limited to “beware the capitalists in the West!” – though this change in tone is important to note. Unlike the earlier years where we see hope for capitalists, that they may possibly come around with enough support (such as in *Our Daily Bread*), here the roles are black and white. The West German bartender is an agent of corruption to these (and potentially *all*) German youth and serves his own agenda. It appears at this point that not all West Germans were to be trusted as the capitalist system had begun to breed immorality and potentially opened the door to a new fascist system taking hold.⁸⁴

One of the most bizarre events to occur within DEFA during this period was the production of what is possibly the most well-known and successful film to emerge from East

⁸³ *Gefährliche Fracht*, directed by Gustav von Wangenheim (DEFA, 1954).

⁸⁴ *Alarm im Zirkus*, directed by Gerhard Klein (DEFA, 1954).

Germany – 1953’s megahit *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*).

Directed by Wolfgang Staudte, the man behind *Murderers*, this children’s film is as safe and escapist as it is charming and entertaining. The story behind Staudte’s involvement is not entirely known (at least through my own research), though it is remarkably bizarre considering his long history with political films besides *Murderers*. In both 1949 and 1951 he released a political drama and political comedy under DEFA, respectively titled *Rotation* and *Der Untertan* (*The Kaiser’s Lackey*). Between *Murderers* and *Little Mook*, he had also filmed a drama for West Germany and a light comedy which turned out to be a remake of a film he produced in 1944 that was lost during WWII. Up to *Little Mook*, his track record was filled with artistically important films with heavy emphasis on antifascism and self-interpretation.⁸⁵

Making Staudte’s connection to *Little Mook* even more bizarre was his intent and original involvement with directing an adaptation of Berthold Brecht’s antifascist play “Mother Courage and Her Children.” Given the dark tale, its calls for pacifism, and its portrayal of characters profiting from war, it certainly appears to be within Staudte’s wheelhouse. Despite his, the film fell through for reasons that can only be speculated upon and the director was instead assigned by DEFA to the children’s film, much to his dismay.⁸⁶ Though pure conjecture, this cancelation of a film that would eventually be made in 1961 – long after the Uprising – does tie into what we know about the SED’s attempt to crackdown on cultural productions and create bland, “educational” films. Considering the reluctance to show films like *Murderers* in the public, it is no wonder that a film based on “Mother Courage” was canceled in the wake of an Uprising where the Soviet Army had to use tanks and the East German secret police to affect suppression. At this juncture, it became seemingly necessary to neuter the artistic ability of

⁸⁵ *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck*, directed by Wolfgang Staudte (DEFA, 1953), <https://cortland.kanopy.com/video/story-little-mook>.

⁸⁶ Jim Morton, “The Story of Little Mook,” *East German Cinema Blog*, November 29, 2010, <https://eastgermancinema.com/2010/11/29/the-story-of-little-mook/>.

directors like Staudte who excelled in artistic, political films while the SED worked on regaining control.

Films such as *Murderers* remained distant from the public consciousness through 1955, finally regaining a semblance of cultural presence in the summer of that year. Starting in early June, *Murderers* was finally shown for the first time that year in a Berlin cinema before being shown in multiple locations with relative frequency throughout July and August.⁸⁷ Articles discussing DEFA once again referred to the film in a positive light – which was a significant improvement over the past two years, where the film was hardly mentioned at all. In a 1955 article discussing the recent goals and successes of DEFA achieving international import/ export deals (in part due to the success of films like *Little Mook*), the author recalled the history of the film company. The article relates how upon its creation by General Tiulpanov, the leader of the Soviet military administration, he proclaimed that “‘DEFA’s greatest task... is the struggle for building a Democratic Germany, the struggle for the education of the German people... in the sense of real democracy and humanity.’”⁸⁸ According to this author, the release of *Murderers* several months later in 1946 had been a marked success. The film had proven that DEFA “had taken these words to heart and understood them.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, while DEFA was barred from producing art on a similar scale during this time, the Politburo felt that the goal of “education” was likewise met with its production of propagandistic films.

As we trace the story of *Murderers*, the film was undoubtedly gaining public and Party attention once more in late 1955. That this film had itself become an object of German history while its goal was to confront the German past is only slightly ironic. With the Uprising now in the past and fears of another revolt diminished, *Murderers* was able to rise from the grave.

⁸⁷ “Filmprogramm der Woche,” *Berliner Zeitung*: June 3, 1955; July 15, 1955; July 22, 1955; August 19, 1955.

⁸⁸ “An den Aufgaben wuchs die Kraft: Am 1. Oktober: 5 Jahre Defa-Filmübernahme- und Außenhandelsbetrieb,” *Berliner Zeitung*, September 30, 1955.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Though the rebirth of this film was important in and of itself, the greater significance surrounds the change in antifascist discussion which, at the time, was slowly being weaponized against West Germany.

In a July 1955 article published in *Berliner Zeitung*, we see a headline screaming with the all too familiar title: “Die Mörder sind unter uns.” The article is short and features absolutely no discussion or reference to the film at all – instead it is quickly quoting a Dortmund publication discussing fascism in West Germany and that there is “a takeover of power in the *Bundesrepublik*.”⁹⁰ Though seemingly innocuous, this short article sandwiched on the timeline between numerous pieces praising *Murderers* as a cultural bedrock of East Germany – and thus Germany at large – does not seem to be accidental. The film had just begun regaining traction with public screenings and, with its recent re-deification, the name and its themes were undoubtedly becoming central to a changing idea of antifascism in the GDR.

Through the period of 1953 through 1955 film in East Germany had been dealt a serious blow. With the Uprising of 1953 came a massive cultural crackdown by the SED that greatly altered film production. The once-artistic films became proselytizing pictures that sought to “educate” the citizens of East Germany’s superiority – and perhaps more importantly hoped to present their messages in pure black and white to limit any potential blowback. It was because of this that films open to multiple interpretations like *Murderers* disappeared from the public eye while propagandistic shlock like the Ernst Thälmann films became the norm. Despite the overarching visual and stylistic changes to films, another important change was taking place. The theme of antifascism remained in films at this time, though it was beginning to evolve once more. This period served as a transition between pictures promoting the reform of capitalists

⁹⁰ “Die Mörder sind unter uns,” *Berliner Zeitung*, July 8, 1955. This is not the first time that the film’s name was used as a political message. Oddly, it was referenced supposedly in an article published in “Der Tat” – a publication that supposedly ceased publication in 1944 with the Second World War. Its history is veiled; however, historically, it had socialist leanings. “BDJ-Mordpläne — Vorgeschmack auf den Kriegspakt,” *Neues Deutschland*, October 14, 1952.

and demonizing America to films viewing West Germany as a more immediate threat and holding capitalism as a truly corrupting evil with no possibility of salvation.

**“You are All Guilty... Equally Guilty!”:
Antifascism Turned Towards West Germany, 1956 – 1961**⁹¹

As the 1950s progress, we find ourselves in an East German nation that was bound and determined to change dramatically. Though still marked with post-Uprising fears in 1956, Khrushchev’s cultural thaw in the Soviet Union seemed to finally reach film productions in satellite East Germany. This period is marked not only by the rise of genre films and rebirth of quality DEFA productions, but also by the ghost of the Uprising. This, in turn, impacts the discussion of antifascism, radically altering it from the almost hopeful message that not all capitalists were beyond redemption and painting America as the main corruptor. Here, we start to see that West Germany is the foe – albeit with America looming as a greater, more obscure threat. Moreover, it appears that there is little hope for those corrupted by the greed of a capitalist/ fascist system. This is immediately evident, not only in DEFA’s newer productions, but also in the usage of *Murderers* to link West Germany to Nazism.

Though films and cultural outputs began to return to a semblance of normalcy during the thaw, Ulbricht and his Politburo were clearly still cautious – and moreover, they were determined to firmly establish the events of Day X as a Western plot to undermine (or even overthrow) East German leadership. Though filmed in 1956 and released in 1957 – well into the thaw – the two-part response to the Uprising, *Schlösser und Katen* (*Castles and Cottages*), carried over many of the ideas and themes from not only the earliest DEFA productions, but also those released in the 1953-55 interregnum. In many ways, *Castles and Cottages* can be seen as a transitional film in this regard. And though, again, it was released well past the

⁹¹ Quote from: *Sterne*, directed by Konrad Wolf (DEFA, 1959), DVD.

events of the Uprising, its status as the only East German film to portray and discuss it makes it an instrumental film in the evolving antifascist discussion.

Though released the following year, *Castles and Cottages* had already been announced in 1956 to be the 100th DEFA film which, when considering the short ten-year life of the company, is a remarkable achievement.⁹² In any stretch, this film was set up to be an important release just by considering its release number. Combine this triumph with a successful (at least according to the SED) fulfillment of the second set of five-year plans and you have a reason to celebrate. This film also has the dubious honor of being possibly the only two-part East German film released as a single feature. It was directed by none other than Kurt Maetzig – the highly regarded DEFA director behind *Marriage in the Shadows*, *Council of the Gods*, the *Ernst Thälmann* series of films, and (after *Castles*) *The Silent Star* which turned out to be the first East German science fiction film. For all intents and purposes, *Castles* was clearly marked to be an important one that would mean something to the nation – and considering the subsequent reimplementations of *Murderers* in mainstream GDR culture, Maetzig's latest film certainly had to live up to some high expectations.

In many ways, *Castles* served as not only a history lesson on the challenges inherent in the founding of East Germany, but also a response to the Uprising that had threatened the young nation's existence. The first half of the film (titled *Crooked Anton*) starts with a fright. The film is located on the estate of a Count and the surrounding village, and starts after the end of WWII with the land still occupied by the British – at least for the first few minutes. We find out that the Soviets are about to occupy the land, which sends the Count, the Countess, and many capitalists/ thieves (these groups are essentially the same in this film) taking what they can and leaving the land behind to flee the incoming Red Army. The new overseer assigned by the Count, one Bröker, and his family immediately take it upon themselves to take advantage of the

⁹² "Hundert DEFA-Filme: Über große Erfolge und höhere Ansprüche," *Neues Deutschland*, April 22, 1956.

Count's absence, often with the help of the titular hunchbacked character, Crooked Anton. Anton's daughter, Annegret, is actually the daughter of the Count after he raped his maid, Martha. Martha then raised the child as her and Anton's daughter due to Anton's kindness to them. Anton becomes corrupted by greed in his attempt to provide security for his family through Bröker. His physical deformity is a not-so-subtle nod to the crooked moral state of the man as he works to marry his daughter to Bröker's son in order to gain an inheritance. The first part of the film ends with Annegret leaving the village with Heinz – her lover and the father of her child – disgusted at the actions of Bröker, his son, and Crooked Anton who all seemed to be colluding to profit from her.⁹³

The second film features far more familial and local drama as Annegret returns to the estate during government-mandated efforts to collectivize land. After the return of the Count, the wealthy landowners grow more and more skeptical of land reform. When Bröker's son Ekkehart returns on orders from West Germany and the Americans, the landowners rise up only to have their movement quelled by Soviet forces. Anton, in the very end, realizes that his desire to gain wealth for his family caused him to harm them by his efforts. He returns to the farming collective and is fully accepted.⁹⁴

What is remarkable about this film is the ease at which it introduces positive aspects of the Soviet occupation all while keeping them tucked behind the family drama. As the film plays out, we are introduced to the Russians and our socialist characters that help to guide the story into something resembling socialist-realism. Upon the arrival of the Red Army we are immediately greeted with tanks and a military convoy – matching the fear of the fleeing capitalists. Yet, the nonchalant Soviets in their few minutes on screen are anything but aggressive. In fact, their short presence is instrumental to aiding a group of refugees they bring

⁹³ *Schlösser und Katen*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (DEFA, 1957), DVD.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

with them. Though they have no active hand in providing the essentials – “houses, food and work” – they turn to the locals and demand results within “three hours;” this is something the local communists happily oblige while the landowners resist.⁹⁵ We are given our male lead shortly after, the kindhearted Heinz who arrives as a refugee searching for his family. He, with his Soviet technical education, is skilled enough to fix a tractor – something which earns him great kudos from the socialist secretaries. These leaders are also introduced as wise, caring individuals who constantly talk up the future of the farmstead under the Soviet occupation – dreamily promising tractors, paved roads, etc. in the future, only for the promises to become reality shortly afterwards.⁹⁶ Though this is used by the director in a comical manner, this amiable group provides foreshadowing of the many benefits the Soviets bring in their reconstruction of Germany. We even see land reform take root in the farmstead, and the benefits of joining the collective.

As mentioned earlier, *Castles and Cottages* stands out as a gateway film, despite its release date. As we can clearly see from the film’s setting, it is highly reminiscent of the earliest DEFA films. It focuses heavily on post-war Germany and is filmed in a manner reminiscent of the *Trümmerfilme*. It still provides a capitalist character (in this case, Crooked Anton) who inevitably sees the light of socialism and is welcomed back into the fold – similar to *Our Daily Bread*. *Castles* is, however, also tainted with a propagandistic flair – much like the films made during the interregnum. Though land reform was not covered in these past films, the heavy-handedness used to praise its successes in this film is evident. Few other DEFA films even make mention of land reform, nonetheless sing its praises – the primary example being one *Tinko*, a 1956 film directed by Herbert Ballmann.⁹⁷ It can be assumed that given the nature of this film

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Tinko*, directed by Herbert Ballmann (DEFA, 1956), DVD. A brief summation of *Tinko*: Much like *Castles and Cottages*, it takes place in the early years of the GDR in an agricultural setting. We find a young boy, Tinko, being fought over by his Grandfather and his recently returned from a POW camp Father. We see a classic battle of traditional life vs modernizing with Tinko refusing education to do “man’s work” with his grandfather. Meanwhile

as a prominent release (evidenced by its position as the 100th DEFA release and its two-part status), as well as its position as the official cultural representation of Day X, its production was carefully monitored by the SED and the Politburo to ensure their satisfaction.

Where this film stands out from films in previous eras is in its antifascist discussion. Admittedly, the film does begin to appear uninspired on this front at first. The portrayal of capitalist characters mimics their presentation in *Trümmerfilme* and early 1950s films. For example, Bröker's son Ekkehart is the epitome of capitalism in film. He starts illicit operations in the West with the Count and is even the agent by which the Uprising is carried out. However, perhaps the most obvious way we see him as an enemy is through his personality. Through the entire film he is seen as selfish and self-serving, even willing to circumnavigate his father's (who is himself an irredeemable capitalist character) wishes. He is shown lusting after Annegret and, after she falls for our communist hero, he sets out to steal the Count's family silver (which his father was keeping selfishly), take Annegret, and flee to the West to start a new life. When she rejects his advances, he violently assaults her and attempts to rape her, before being stopped by Heinz – our communist hero.⁹⁸ Unsatisfied with the harsh injustices of the capitalist system, our film's fiend sets out to violate the innocence of a young, promising communist woman.

However, after looking past the plot-centric characterizations of capitalists, we start to see how antifascism was moving away from its roots and changing wholeheartedly into a hostile anti-West mentality. This film portrays capitalism as an inherently evil practice, unlike *Our Daily Bread* which offered sympathy to the concerns of capitalists and provided

the Father, Ernst, representing modern life attempts to bring technology to the farm and push his son to focus on education. As the film progresses the two clash, sometimes violently, and the Grandfather (stuck in his old ways) literally works himself to death while Tinko and Ernst harvest the field with machine labor. Overall, the film is nothing special from an entertainment or even a technical standpoint. It was created before and released amidst Khrushchev's cultural thaw, thus falling into the era of schlocky DEFA productions. It does, however, paint a remarkably simple to follow piece of propaganda. The old ways are dead – we must all work together in a socialist society to promote education and advances in farming to better support our future

⁹⁸ *Schlösser und Katen*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (DEFA, 1957), DVD.

opportunities for a socialist salvation. Capitalism and fascism are joined at the hip and lead to cruelty – there is no escape from their reach. The only mercy granted in this film is for Crooked Anton, and even then only after two full films of heartbreak. His story, in fact, seems to be the most pitiable with regard to the evils of capitalism. He is constantly shown as a victim of harsh treatment and is made a fool of incessantly in the film, so in order to better his and his family's situation he turns to the very system he is a victim in by using his daughter's dowry (a concession from her biological father) as a means of gaining status.⁹⁹ He, in the end, learns that his family is better off without capitalism and becomes a part of the land collective.

Another difference from past DEFA productions is that *Castles* does not use antifascism as a confrontation of the past. There are no Nazis in the film, no bombs, no telling of the story of WWII. The film purposefully starts after the war has ended and features little to no discussion of what came before the occupation of the Soviets. The film appears to overlook that part of GDR history – as if leaving it to the reconstructed past detailed in past DEFA films such as *Murderers*.

Perhaps the most pressing change to the antifascist discussion we see is in the way the film discusses Day X.¹⁰⁰ The film adheres to the state's official message that the West instigated the Uprising with secret agents and the use of RIAS (Radio in the American Sector). This film also happens to be the only East German film where the Uprising is mentioned even offhandedly; thus, this film is the be all and end all of cultural discourse on the events in 1953. By portraying the Western agent in this film as Ekkehart and having him receive his orders from West Germany, we as the audience are led to believe that the neighboring German state is, perhaps, the newest threat to East German sovereignty. Therefore, as will be increasingly

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. This information is available in the DVD's Special Features.

common in films released through 1961, antifascism is pointed directly at West Germany, with America falling back as some vague, looming threat.

According to *Castles*, the GDR's view was that West Germany had become corrupted. "How?" one might ask, "by whom?" Though *Castles* did not seek to answer this question, it appeared East Germany was willing to use *The Murderers are Among Us* to provide an answer. Ten years after its release, the time was finally right for the "murderers" to be revealed. According to sources at the time, it appears that the answer is (drumroll please...) the West German leadership. We have already seen evidence in the previous section that points to this shift in mentality, though starting in 1956 it gained traction – eventually becoming commonplace. We see this immediately with a reinterpretation of the premier of *Murderers are Among Us*. While the earliest GDR articles on *Murderers* praise the film for its appeal to all Germans and its realism, articles at this time discuss the earliest showings of the film as rooting out evil: "While some followed what happened on the screen, it (the film) had driven the other, the murderers among us, from their chairs. They felt captured like a criminal in a spotlight, because the film had shown their true face."¹⁰¹

As the film's history was being reinterpreted to paint West Germany as harboring fascists, newspapers across the East were beginning to adopt the film – and more prominently its *title* – for advancing this purpose. In March 1956, Neues Deutschland published a scathing article seemingly discussing a West German Christian and Jewish effort to commemorate the horrors of the Holocaust with a week-long event. Using the phrase "where is your brother?" as its motto, it encouraged West Germans to commemorate the horrors of the Holocaust and remember the missing "Jewish brothers from Germany (and) all over Europe."¹⁰² East German newspapers took to this event immediately. If one were to ask that question, the article poses,

¹⁰¹ "Hundert DEFA-Filme: Über große Erfolge und höhere Ansprüche," *Neues Deutschland*, April 22, 1956.

¹⁰² "Wo ist dein Bruder?," *Neues Deutschland*, March 3, 1956.

they may very well “get an answer from the leader of (their) party, Christian Chancellor Adenauer. In his government there are people who know very well.”¹⁰³ The article then quickly transitions to describing the alleged roles of West German officials in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, essentially calling the event to commemorate “the catastrophe” as ironic and inauthentic.¹⁰⁴ While linking Adenauer and his cronies to the Nazis, there is an explicit mention of *Murderers*: “That was the name of a film that was in theaters ten years ago. It was a warning of monsters masked as stooges and walking below us undetected. How the situation in West Germany has changed since then! They are no longer undetected and are no longer afraid of being discovered!”¹⁰⁵ After this, the comparisons continue with one directly relating Adenauer’s Chancellorship to that of “Chancellor Hitler” – with his party and administration made of either ex-Nazis or those who seem to share sympathies.¹⁰⁶

What makes the article so important to our discussion is the fact that *Murderers* was used to evoke a sort of memory among the readers. We see directly how the interpretation of the film was changing to match this new definition of antifascism. With Adenauer’s government and West Germany seemingly filled with fascists, the message of *Murderers* was changing into a warning that the murderers – the capitalists, the fascists, and the ex-Nazis – had regained power and were leading a state bent on undermining the East – as the GDR believed occurred during the Uprising. Though the article’s argument is powerful and poignant in its own right, the usage of *Murderers’* name and plot is important. The film clearly has such a large place in the East German psyche that using its name was not only justified but furthered the points of the article.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

This article is by no means alone in presenting the FRG in this light – and certainly was not alone in using the film to evoke some sort of response. Through the rest of the 1950s and early 1960s we see numerous news articles use the film to this extent. Berliner Zeitung in 1957 lamented that “the overwhelming majority of former members of the Nazi Party in the Federal Republic” had voted to retain Adenauer as Chancellor (notice how by now it is already not news that Nazis are in the West. It is just a known, solid, normalized fact according to this passage). In response, a large group of West German intellectuals gave speeches across the country warning: “‘The murderers are among us. The majority of the concentration camp guards roam freely among us.’”¹⁰⁷

The GDR increased its criticism of the West in following years such as during attacks on the “Nazi-Blutrichtern” – or “Nazi Blood Judges.” In 1958, a group of SS soldiers were put on trial in the West for allegedly killing 208 Soviet laborers at the end of WWII. Given that it had been twelve years since the mass-killing and that the accused had apparently risen to “leading ranks” in the West, FRG magazine Revue referred to them quite simply as “the murderers... among us.”¹⁰⁸ The East continued to follow the trial and post frequent news updates until in mid-February when a sentencing was finally passed.

Referencing the film by name, Berliner Zeitung reminds the readers “how hot this topic is right now in the current situation in West Germany” – thus the movie’s legacy is once again called upon to remind East Germany that the enemies of peace and freedom are roaming – if not *leading* – the West. The article blamed the Nazi-led judiciary system which was “characteristic” of the FRG for handing the accused a light sentence – something the remainder of the article works to reinforce by listing numerous other Nazis who received similar sentences

¹⁰⁷ “Die Anhänger Hitlers sind Anhänger Adenauers: Antisemitische Äußerungen des Kanzlers / Warnende Worte vor faschistischer Gefahr,” *Berliner Zeitung*, September 24, 1957.
And “Nährboden für Faschisten: Loccumer Akademietagung zur westdeutschen Entwicklung,” *Neues Deutschland*, September 25, 1957.

¹⁰⁸ “SS -Bestien endlich vor Gericht,” *Berliner Zeitung*, January 11, 1958.

or were exonerated.¹⁰⁹ Months later in a speech by Albert Norden, a member of the Politburo, the Blood Judges of West Germany came up in a long discussion. Sandwiched between a long history of corruption in the West, Norden refers to the film – but takes it one step further. “In West Germany today, the population has to admit that the murderers are *above* (emphasis added) us.” According to him, and presumably the state at large, the leaders of West Germany were directly connected to the Nazis and were the only inhibiting factor preventing a peaceful reunification of Germany – something that would elude the nations for another three decades.¹¹⁰

Though the trial ended, the usage of *Murderers*’ public memory continued – however, the list is far too expansive a topic to cover even lightly.¹¹¹ The weight of these discussions is perhaps made even more important with the sudden resurgence of *Murderers* across East Germany. Staudte’s classic started 1956 as a part of the cultural bedrock of East Germany and was hailed as “the foundation for realistic German post-war films... (something) the artists have remained faithful to.”¹¹² Though DEFA was enjoying its tenth year in 1956 and was currently producing its 100th film, its first film was suddenly becoming an important part of its history again – something to which all seemingly important DEFA films were compared to.

Looking through newspaper sources, we see that *Murderers* enjoyed a renaissance of sorts at the box office, being shown with increasing ferocity during the next few years, and finally peaking in 1958 (Fig. 2). During this time, it was part of several international film festivals – the most prominent being in Yugoslavia and Britain. There were artist lectures surrounding

¹⁰⁹ “Mörder in Richterrobe,” *Berliner Zeitung*, February 14, 1958.

¹¹⁰ “Provokationen gegen Deutschland und den Frieden: Rede von Prof. Albert Norden, Mitglied des Politbüros, auf der internationalen Pressekonferenz in Berlin,” *Neues Deutschland*, October 22, 1958.

¹¹¹ In 1958 alone, there are articles refereeing to the “murderers” in West Germany in relation to: West German elections, the death of Anne Frank, public unrest in the West, nuclear weapons, banned public referendums, police brutality, etc.

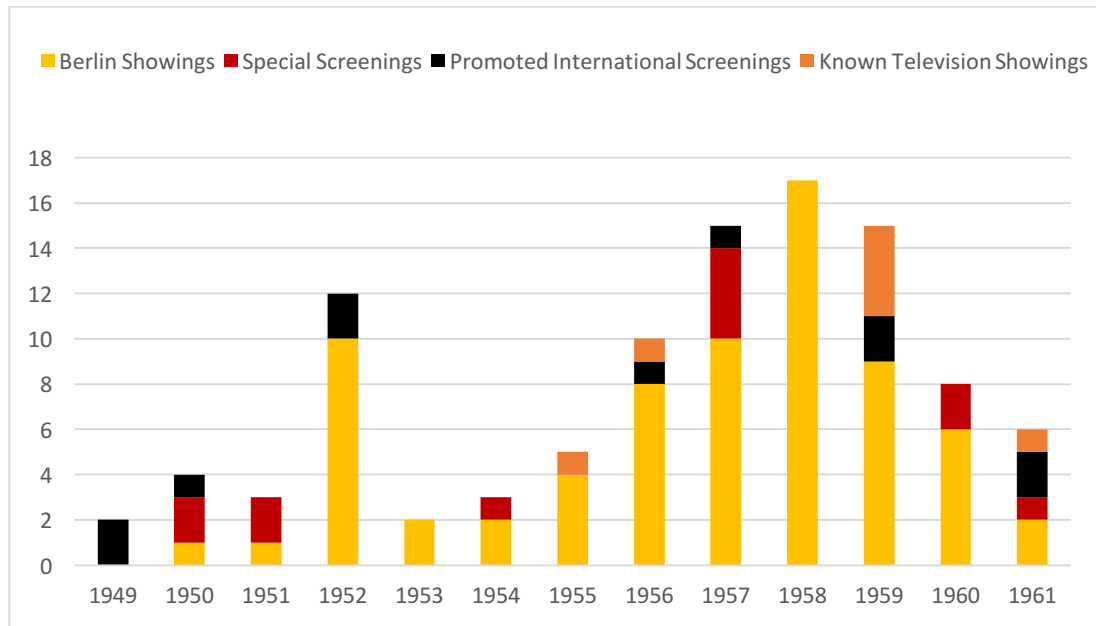
¹¹² “Hundert DEFA-Filme: Über große Erfolge und höhere Ansprüche,” *Neues Deutschland*, April 22, 1956.

the film several times in 1957. And it even was premiered on television – a burgeoning artform in the GDR at the time. Further evidence comes from the release of new film posters.

The new 1958 poster borrowed heavily from the original advertising material for this film and features, once again, an illustration of Susanne's face looking vacantly at the viewer while a shadowed figure stands behind her. Interestingly, gone are the colors of fire – the reds, yellows, and oranges. Instead, the poster is predominantly blue, save for the odd tan of Susanne's face and the pitch-black figure (Appendix II).¹¹³ In 1960, despite the popularity of the film seemingly dying down, it once again received a wide release with new advertising. The poster here is strikingly different in that it features a photo of Susanne (albeit in black and yellow) superimposed in a box over an illustration of the villainous Brückner standing in a tuxedo behind what appears to be prison bars. He is up against a green stonewall, his face appears to be mildly concerned and washed in a striking red as the traditional shadowed image stands before him. We can finally assume this figure is none other than the doctor. And in the context, it appears he is preparing to exact his revenge, something he chose not to do in the film proper (Appendix II).¹¹⁴ The posters, in particular the later one, appear more aggressive than mysterious – seemingly mirroring the shift in antifascist meanings in the interpretation of the film. However, what this poster truly shows is that the film had a larger rerelease than in Berlin. For a new poster to be made, it is safe to assume that DEFA was promoting this film to a larger extent and, as such, it received greater play across the GDR – thus spreading its reinterpreted message of antifascism to an ever eager (and ever increasing) audience.

¹¹³ Helmbold, *Mehr Kunst als Werbung*, 121.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.



(Fig. 2)

Despite the high bar this film set and the praise it still received, at this time it seems that DEFA was beginning to acknowledge the will of the public regarding film demands. The seeking of not only the artistic but financial high ground is an important aspect to this era, as it influenced the cultural thaw from 1956 through 1961. In an article praising the tenth year of East German filmmaking in 1956, much of the article still focuses on the idea of a successful or unsuccessful film – predominantly through ideas of profits. These monetary concerns are echoed throughout when discussing how *Murderers* was a cornerstone to “realistic German art” and that DEFA’s most recent film *Hauptmann von Köln (The Captain from Cologne)* would undoubtedly “see great profits after years.” (author’s note: it did not.)¹¹⁵

After years of propagandistic films in the early to mid-1950s, the demands of the public to see changes in their entertainment were so prominent that they began appearing in newspapers. One article stands out in its plea to DEFA’s writers and producers. Published in

¹¹⁵ Horst Knietzsch, “Film, Filmkunst und Praxis: Gedanken zur Spielfilmproduktion der DEFA,” *Neues Deutschland*, December 29, 1956.

Neues Deutschland, the official state paper, an article aptly titled “The Neglected Comedy Film” starts with a fairly standard political message for the time. It begins with a harsh criticism of West German film production and its inability to “create serious contributions to the renewal of German *Filmkunst*.” It blames, in large part, the desire of the West to fulfill its desire for box office success over artistic success – ironic considering the short-term future of DEFA. This is followed, of course, by praise for films from the GDR, name dropping *Murderers* and the then-recent release of the second *Ernst Thälmann* film along with several other films between (a number which we have already covered). The praise is laced with further criticism of post-war films by claiming DEFA had “determined the face of the postwar German film.”¹¹⁶

However, after this rather pedestrian introduction, the article takes a surprising turn. The article acknowledges “the demands of the population” are not being met with DEFA’s current focuses and that the audience would prefer films that are in the “‘cheerful’ genres.” This is a remarkable admission and stands directly in the face of the East’s criticism of West German films providing no cultural impact. Even later, the article goes on to lambast several attempts at East German comedies before conceding some recent successes – though their discussions pale in comparison to the gushing praise for the highlighted earlier films.¹¹⁷

The overwhelming desires of the public to see more artistically interesting or entertaining films over the interregnum era productions seemed to have come at the perfect time. Combined with undoubted fears of the Politburo that they were losing money to Western theaters and films in addition to the cultural thaws, starting in 1956, East Germany was experiencing a cultural boom of sorts. Compared to the prior decade, DEFA productions were being released seemingly constantly with the period from 1956 – 1959 seeing 72 feature films

¹¹⁶ Horst Knietzsch, “Die vernachlässigte Filmkomödie,” *Neues Deutschland*, February 11, 1956.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

released as compared to 37 in the previous four-year stretch.¹¹⁸ This is not to say that DEFA did not have means of production during the lull; 1949 and 1950 saw twelve and eleven films released, respectively. As to what accounted for the decrease in production – little can be confidently said, though based on previous discussions surrounding 1953-1955, we can hazard a guess that DEFA was deliberately producing fewer films while it attempted to find its footing post-Uprising. This becomes especially likely when we remember that the SED openly acknowledged film as possibly the most powerful and influential form of art. It is notable that 1952 and 1953 saw the release of only six and seven films, respectively, while public unrest leading up to the Uprising was at its highest.¹¹⁹

As for the 72 feature films released during this stretch through 1959, we start to see the rise of the genre film – something we have seen the public had been clamoring for. Though dramas, historical films, and crime films seemed to remain the predominant output of DEFA (and I have no intention of viewing each film released for its exact genre), there was noticeable rise in the release of comedy, romance, fantasy, and even sports films.¹²⁰ These years even saw what may very well be the first original East German musical – *Meine Frau macht Musik* (*My Wife Makes Music*) released in 1958. The desire for such entertaining films was clear as this movie went on to be a massive commercial hit for the nation, becoming the tenth most successful DEFA film in the GDR – despite its critical shortcomings and dissatisfaction from the SED.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Heinz Flesch, “Aufführungen aller Spielfilme und abendfüllenden Dokumentarfilme seit 1945,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 10 (October 1959).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ This information was received by reviewing the list of released films at: Heinz Flesch, “Aufführungen aller Spielfilme und abendfüllenden Dokumentarfilme seit 1945,” *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 10 (October 1959). Afterwards I then compared each film to: F.-B. Habel, *Das Grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme* (Berlin, DE: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1999). Here I was able to discern their respective genres.

¹²¹ The film received flak for having many West German performers and for too closely mimicking Western film conventions. Habel, *Das Grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme*, 398-399. Information on the film’s economic success is available at: “Die Erfolgreichsten DDR-Filme in der DDR,” Inside Kino, accessed April 10, 2020, <http://www.insidekino.de/DJahr/DDRAlltimeDeutsch.htm>.

In addition to commercially successful films, there were numerous critical successes. *Betrogen bis zum jüngsten Tag* (*Duped Until Doomsday*) and *Sterne* (*Stars*) become the first and second East German productions to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1957 and 1959, respectively. At Cannes the latter was awarded the Special Grand Jury Prize and was later a selection at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Melbourne International Film Festival, and the Sydney International Film Festival throughout 1959 and 1960.¹²² And as if any other examples were necessary to see the cultural thaw in effect for this time, approximately eight feature films were released between 1956 and 1961 that were coproductions with other nations – a surprising number of them with Western European nations.¹²³

Throughout the thaw, DEFA filmmakers took this opportunity to attempt to produce films of cultural importance as they had done in their earliest days. Influenced as much by American films such as *The Wild Ones* as they were from a desire to reject the tenants of socialist realism, “Berlin Films” were made to show dissatisfaction of youth and to hopefully show the socialist system how to improve and stop alienating its future generations.¹²⁴ At first glance, this sort of film seems to be the complete opposite of films such as *Castles and Cottages*. However, when deconstructing elements of the plot and film itself, you find that the antifascist demonization of West Germany remains.

Perhaps the most well-known of the “Berlin Films” is Gerhard Klein’s 1957 classic: *Berlin-Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin – Schönhauser Corner*). The film surrounds a group of friends and their hangout at the titular street corner in East Berlin. Unlike many of the other films discussed so far, here we find a modernized and rebuilt Germany. Gone are the rubble and allusions to WWII

¹²² “Stars,” Awards, DEFA Film Library, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://ecommerce.umass.edu/defa/film/3582>.

¹²³ The Western nations in question are France and Sweden – with France and the GDR making three. The number is not exact as not all details surrounding DEFA feature film releases or productions are readily accessible. This is the number of films I have been able to discern through my research.

¹²⁴ *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser*, directed by Gerhard Klein (DEFA, 1957), DVD. Information found in the “Introduction Essay,” by Barton Byg on DVD.

– fitting as this film surrounds the German youth and their desire to have a good time in the face of a culturally repressive society. The film seems totally aware of its subject matter, playing jazz as its soundtrack to rebellion – though it is also comical in its James Dean greaser sendups that look like they belong more in *Grease* than in a legitimate rebellion film. But I digress.

Our three main characters are as follows: Dieter, the male protagonist who works hard all day and is shrugging off advances from the socialist youth group Free German Youth, despite the obvious value he would bring them. He is the main love interest of Angela, a young woman who is struggling to get along with her family in the first generation after WWII. Last, we find Karl Heinz, Dieter's best friend and our primary antagonist. Much of the film does fall into trying to show rebellion with many scenes focusing on youth vandalizing property, dancing recklessly to jazz music, and complaining to the film's representation of authority (Dieter's officer brother): "Why can't I live my way? Why do you have all these rules?"¹²⁵ However, unsurprisingly, there is hope for our group of "rowdies" to see the light of the socialist society. More on this later.

As discussed earlier, it is common in many antifascist films to find at least one character corrupted by the glitz and glimmer of capitalism. In *Berlin – Schönhauser Corner*, this is manifested in Karl Heinz' falling victim to the allure of living in West Germany. Karl Heinz attempts to make his way westward through criminal means that harm the East. He takes to stealing IDs from GDR citizens and selling them to shady Western individuals. He progresses into the West German criminal underworld and, under the commands of his shady benefactors, kills a man. The benefactors immediately flip on Karl Heinz and, before they flee the crime scene, take Karl's promised payment and blame him alone for the murder. Despite his absolute desire to join a corrupt capitalist system, it is surprisingly *not* Karl who escapes to the West, but Dieter. After fearing he murdered Karl following a violent confrontation over the stealing of IDs,

¹²⁵ *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser*, directed by Gerhard Klein (DEFA, 1957), DVD.

Dieter boards a train westward under the guise that he was “being coerced into joining the so-called People’s National Army.” This is, mainly, as they “have to say its political. They (the West officials) like that.”¹²⁶ Already, we see that he is faking his allegiance to the West and distaste of the East. Furthermore, we see the West portrayed as plotting against the GDR – seeking IDs for unspecified reasons and seeking any and all information on the East, regardless of its veracity.

His time in the West is short-lived, however, as he lives in a halfway home for those who fled the East. In his temporary home he is being assaulted by a group of other ex-East Germans who want “to show (him) what freedom is.” He asks to leave, but the Western authorities claim that he is a spy and refuse to let him. Despite this, Dieter escapes back to the East to be with Angela and confront his potential crime. The movie ends with Dieter and Angela, who is expecting, happily reunited while Karl is alive and in prison for his treacherous acts. All is as it should be – the future of the GDR is safe within the borders, where they can “make a fresh start and exercise all their potential.”¹²⁷ They both learned to enjoy the society they live in and overcome their youthful rebellion.

When viewing the film in a literal sense, I can understand how the youth or citizens might view it as a rebellion film. We see youth as lead characters attempting to portray relatable themes of discontent. They desire *something* – though they are unsure as to what it truly is. They are just sure that the GDR does not provide it. However, while discontent with the current system takes the foreground, there are numerous manners in which we can still identify the antifascism theme in this film – primarily in its portrayal of state functionaries. Dieter’s brother, a police officer in the East, is introduced initially to be a foil. He shows discontent and disappointment at Dieter’s hooligan behavior – mirroring GDR society. However, throughout the film, we see him and the police officers working to improve the Corner gang’s lives –

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

attempting to set up an apprenticeship for one. When Angela is distraught and forced from her home after her pregnancy comes to light, it is the police who pick her up and shelter her until Dieter's return. Furthermore, in comparison to the harsh, critical, and suspicious Western officers who treat Dieter as a prisoner, the East officers welcome him back with open arms and kindness.¹²⁸

Though the officers are not immediately aware of the discontents of East German youth, they are still kind in their efforts to help. They show tough love, but their manner of dealing with Dieter's group is ultimately one of peace and hope that one day they will achieve their potential as socialists. Contrastingly, in their short time in the West, Dieter and his friend are essentially left to fend for themselves. The capitalist system they are subjected to provides no option to improve their situation. They learn their mistake in fleeing the East and the benefits of socialism. Though this criticism is clearly anticapitalist, it is also inherently critical of West Germany. The Eastern officers are willing to support the youth and, after Dieter returns, hear his concerns. Their counterparts in West Germany seek only to tear down not only Dieter and his comrade, but also East Germany in their request for damning information – even when false. These ideas are only furthered in contemporary reviews of the film. Writing for BZ am Abend, the reviewer remarks that some characters were “mobsters who behave as if they were Al Capone's companions as babies.”¹²⁹ It takes only a moment to realize the characters in question are those running the dubious home in the West, as well as those invading West Germans who manipulated Karl-Heinz into murder.

Overall, despite its entrance into a cultural thaw following the Uprising and subsequent crackdown 1956 through 1961, it is evident that East Germany's definition of antifascism had evolved to its most hostile. Through the examination of productions and newspapers of this

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Peter Edel, “(Review),” *BZ am Abend*, September 2, 1957. Quoted in F.-B. Habel, *Das Grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme* (Berlin, DE: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1999), 63.

period, as well as reinterpretations of *Murderers*, East Germany clearly no longer saw capitalists as redeemable under a socialist system. The corrupting power of capitalism was inherent to the system and was to be feared. To add to this discussion, antifascist sentiments were now targeted primarily at West Germany instead of America. Furthermore, the East now viewed its Western neighbor as led by Nazis, thus further tying capitalism to fascism and seemingly damning the West. Gone from DEFA films is the sentimentality and wistfulness of rebuilding Germany as a unified Socialist nation; it is replaced instead with the dread of corruption and terror that the West might be plotting against the GDR. The specter of the Uprising seems to have left the nation reeling and constantly wary of their capitalist neighbor.

“Where You Won’t Find Us, You’ll Find our Enemies.”: Conclusion¹³⁰

Though 1961 marks the end of my research, antifascism persisted as a theme through the remainder of DEFA’s (and East Germany’s) lifespan. According to the GDR, the West remained a tangible threat to their ideas of democracy – and the United States would once again join the ranks as an omnipresent enemy as the Cold War became increasingly hostile. From this increased animosity the Berlin Wall would rise, perhaps becoming the most visible representation of the ideological divide between East and West. And though the timeline is apparent now, at the start of 1961 German citizens were unaware of what lay ahead.¹³¹ While DEFA films at this time were pointedly condemning the West for their alleged ties to Nazis, this picture of antifascism was significantly different from its earliest incarnation in the Soviet Sector.

¹³⁰ Quote from: *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser*, directed by Gerhard Klein (DEFA, 1957), DVD.

¹³¹ Important Berlin Wall events timeline: Construction: 1961. John F. Kennedy speech: 1963. Ronald Reagan Speech: 1987. David Hasselhoff (only semi-literally) toppling the Wall: 1989.

Before Germany was reconstructed as two distinct nations, it was occupied as four Sectors. Starting in 1946, the Soviet Sector granted the newly formed production company DEFA the first and only film license it would grant. From its first film, *The Murderers are Among Us*, the antifascism theme was inherent in all their productions. In these first few years marked by the rise of the *Trümmerfilm* or Rubble Film genre, antifascism was at its most pure. Films confronted Germany's Nazi past and, perhaps influenced by their tie to Soviets, seemed to argue that unchecked capitalism was a forebearer to fascism. The films, however, still maintained a message of hope and often surrounded the goal of reconstructing Germany in as a united, socialist society.

When the Soviet Sector transformed into the German Democratic Republic in 1949, antifascism was retooled to fit the growing tensions of the Cold War and fit the GDR's political aims. Though fascism was still tied directly to capitalism, a villain was cast to represent this. America, the home of unchecked capitalism, was chosen to represent the enemy in East Germany's films and served as the primary obstacle to Germany's glorious socialist future. DEFA films still confronted Germany's dark, fascist past and promoted socialism as the end goal – however the films were careful not to align all capitalists with the villainous American interests. There was clearly still hope for the misguided capitalists – particularly those who resided in West Germany and were still, according to the East, under the influence of America. It was through these films that the GDR hoped the West would soon learn the glories and kindnesses of socialism.

This particular antifascist message would remain prominent until, in 1953, the darkest day in East Germany's short history unfolded. Due to various economic and social issues, there was an Uprising in East Germany on June 17, 1953 that required tanks and the Soviet military to suppress. The East German government was left reeling and struggled to right the ship, and as such exerted strong control over cultural outputs. DEFA's films, once artistically made, received

a noticeable downturn in quality and focused on “education” of the public and hyper-propagandistic messages. The SED and DEFA took a safe route in producing ideologically black and white films that proselytized the East as a superior nation. In this time, antifascism was slowly evolving as the SED worked on its narrative of the Uprising.

Starting in 1956, East Germany seemingly enjoyed a cultural rebirth after years of cultural lockdown. This is when antifascism became its most hostile. The Party’s interpretation of the Uprising, though acknowledging America as the orchestrator, ultimately pinned blame squarely on the shoulders of West German agents seeking to reinstate capitalism and place their purported Nazi leadership in charge of the socialist East. Though films were seemingly breaking free artistically in an attempt to be financially successful, they were still highly manicured in regard to their antifascist message. Capitalists in films were no longer capable of being saved – they were too far gone in their greed. Often, we saw East Germans fall victim to the corrupting influence of West Germans – and they paid the price for their lack of faith in the socialist system. These films stand as warnings to the East to beware of West Germany, as the neighboring state was led by Nazis looking to take over the East.

By following the evolution of antifascism in DEFA films, this research enriches the historiography surrounding East German cultural history. We can see how cultural and political policy were not united in the GDR and ran on “dual-tracks” seemingly independent of each other.¹³² For example, in my discussion on 1956 through 1961, it is evident that while the theme of antifascism grew increasingly hardened and narrow, DEFA was granted more freedom to produce artistically interesting and challenging films. Despite a cultural thaw, antifascist messages were more constrained than they had been in the past. This is exemplified perfectly in *Berlin-Schönhauser Corner*. Culturally, the film portrays disaffected East German youth with legitimate criticisms of East Germany. On the political track, however, its antifascist discussion

¹³² This is an idea proposed by Dr. Scott Moranda.

is as heavily critical of West Germany as other films released in this period, portraying them as corrupt, greedy, and cruel.¹³³ Clearly, this complicates the idea that cultural and political policies followed the same track through East Germany's history.

This research is also instrumental in understanding the shift in political sentiments towards West Germany. Antifascism was a constant for East Germany from its inception and was a key ideology of the State. Through the change in antifascism from a reflection on the past to an overtly anti-West German sentiment, we can see a prime justification for the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. In the years directly following WWII, antifascism began as criticism of the Nazi past. Through the 1940s and 1950s, we saw antifascism remain constant in this regard – demonizing Nazism and tying capitalism to fascism. By associating Nazism and fascism with the West, antifascism served to make the harsh separation policies instituted by the East against West Germany a matter of course. According to the East, only socialism would be able to take the once-decimated German nation above their dark past and move towards a brighter future. However, with the West once aided by fascists and now, supposedly, led by fascists, East Germany had no alternative but to protect its people and cut off all ties.

¹³³ *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser*, directed by Gerhard Klein (DEFA, 1957), DVD.

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All archived film materials are courtesy of: Hans Joachim Ring Collection (MS 566). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

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Appendices:

Appendix I:

Since the *Historical Dictionary of German Cinema* failed to include an appropriate number of DEFA films, I feel it is appropriate to formulate my own list of 15 DEFA films that are essential viewing. This is by no means definitive and only includes films that I have seen. So, sorry *Paul und Paula*!

- 1) *The Murderers are Among Us*
- 2) *Council of the Gods*
- 3) *Hot Summer*
- 4) *The Axe of Wansbeck*
- 5) *Stars*
- 6) *Berlin – Schönhauser Corner*
- 7) *Marriage in the Shadows*
- 8) *The Kaiser's Lackey*
- 9) *Rotation*
- 10) *Hot Summer (it deserves two viewings!)*
- 11) *Chingachook: The Snake Warrior*
- 12) *Sun Seekers*
- 13) *Our Daily Bread*
- 14) *The Silent Star*
- 15) *Jakob the Liar* (Not the remake starring Robin Williams. Seriously.)

Honorable Mention: *Hot Summer* (No, really. ~~Watch~~ *Experience* this movie!)

Appendix II:

Below are the posters for *The Murderers are Among Us*. I have photographed these from the book: Helmbold, Detlef. *Mehr Kunst als Werbung: Das DDR-Fimlplakat, 1945-1990*. Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2018.

These posters are organized by their release and by the order I discuss them in the Thesis. There may be additional posters; however, these are the only surviving East German posters according to the book.

1946:



1958:



1960:

